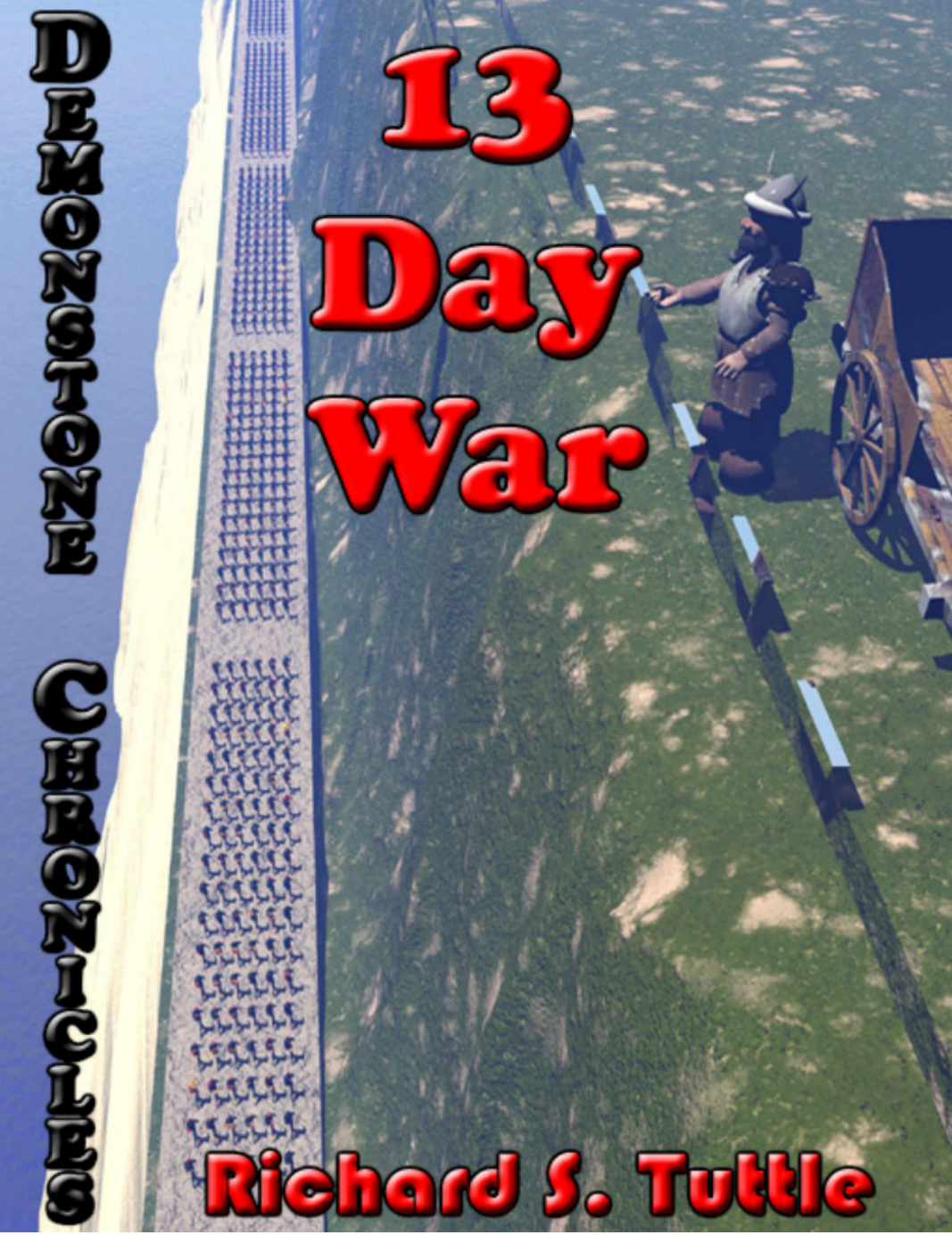
Demonstone Chronicles
13 Day War
Richard S. Tuttle

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13 Day War

Our story so far…

In *Knights of Alcea* the kingdom was awakened from its peaceful slumber when the Alceans discovered a growing rebellion, a rebellion unlike any other. Mysterious priests swore allegiance to Balmak, a previously unknown god, and were spreading seeds of discontent throughout Alcea. As the danger grew, the Knights of Alcea were drawn back into the king's service, and they soon discovered that the rebellion was tied to other ominous events. Elves attacking human villages, and humans attacking dwarves were events unheard of since the forming of Alcea, and together with the rebellion, they seemed designed to bring Alcea to the brink of disaster. Yet, the picture was still not clear enough for Alexander Tork. While all of the problems put together might bring chaos to Alcea, he knew that there had to be more to the sinister plot. Eventually it was discovered that a massive army from an unknown land across the waters was waiting for Alcea to be weakened before attacking.

The Knights of Alcea destroyed the Temples of Balmak and ensured that no division would exist between the races of the kingdom, but they knew that their actions were not enough to ensure that the attack by foreign forces would be stopped. King Arik set out to reorganize and bolster the forces of Alcea to meet the coming invasion, but that was not enough for Alexander Tork. During the course of battles against the mysterious priests, Alex stole a Zaran ship, the Remora. He pressed the king for permission to go to the unknown land and determine the weakness of the enemy. King Arik, believing that Alex would go regardless of permission, finally gave his blessing, but he limited the party to only five Knights of Alcea.

In *Final Voyage of the Remora*, Alex enlisted the aid of three Alcea Rangers and three elves of Glendor to join with the five Knights of Alcea. He hired a captain and crew and set out across the ocean with only a rough chart to guide them into the unknown. The journey was troublesome from the beginning. Two Zaran spies had managed to get themselves included in the crew, and the enemy was waiting for their arrival. Driven by strange dreams, Alex unwittingly outmaneuvered the Zarans and landed in the Endless Swamp. The landing turned out to be fortuitous as the Knights of Alcea made many important contacts including Haditha, the water witch, Sidney Mercado, the merchant, and Morro, the elven thief. Prince Rigal also made contact with the Dielderal elves and discovered that the Federation holds them as slaves. To ensure the Federation's control over the Dielderal, all elven children are taken out of the Elfwoods and kept in reeducation centers in the major cities of the Federation.

Volume two of the Demonstone Chronicles ended with the destruction of the Zaran invasion fleet. It also ended the chances for our heroes to return home to Alcea. Captain Gomery, Haditha, and two sailors were not rescued along with the others. While Captain Gomery and Haditha made it to safety, Loman and Tyroma were never found. The rest of the heroes, knowing that each day of delay would buy Alcea more time to prepare for war, vowed to continue to wage covert actions against the Zarans, but they were confined to the lost city of Aranak, which is deep under the sands of the desert.

In *Council of War*, the Alceans in Zara split up. Garth and Kalina are joined by Tedi, Natia, and Morro as they journey to the major cities of the Federation to learn more about their enemy. Karl Gree leads the rest of the Alceans in an attempt to reach the safety of Tyronia, but his plans are foiled by the Federation as they block Sebastian Pass and send thousands of troops to hunt the Alceans. With nowhere else to turn, Karl leads the group into the Forest of Death, and they are eventually captured by the Zaroccans as spies.

Garth and his party earn the appreciation of the Rhodans by saving three of their women from the Federation army, but those actions demand a retreat to the safety of Tyronia. As the nation of Tyronia falls to the Federation, Garth leads his people to the horse countries on unicorns, but not before substituting Clint for a traitorous Tyronian general. While Clint is sent to Despair as a representative of Tyronia, Garth finds himself involved in a struggle to free Karl's group and establish a Council of War to fight the Federation in Zara. To gain the support of the horse countries, Garth must find twenty thousand fighters to stand against the Federation. In a frenzied tour of the continent, Garth unites the elves, dwarves, and humans of various countries into a strange alliance to battle the Federation. Only time will tell if the alliance stands, and if it will prove to be enough to affect the outcome of the destructive war coming to two continents.

In *Demonkin*, Book Four of the Demonstone Chronicles, the Alceans covertly attack four cities of the Federation, freeing the elven children from the education centers built to hold the elves captive. King Elengal leads the Dielderal through the dwarven tunnel to the sanctuary on the Island of Despair, while making it appear that they have fled to sea in ships.

Meanwhile, the demons create a new breed of demonkin, the Claws of Alutar. These four powerful creatures are designed to extract revenge from the Alceans for the plight of the Great Demon. Their singular goal is to eliminate the Heroes of the Mage, starting with the Warrior King.

Clint, posing as General Forshire, builds his small Federation army and discovers the true nature of Camp Destiny, a massive valley

holding the portals to be used in the coming attack on Alcea.

The Mage, traveling as Fakir Aziz, continues to gather powerful mages to his side. The destination of the group remains a secret, and the mysterious purpose of such immense power is never spoken of.

In *Heirs of the Enemy*, the Knights of Alcea gathered the heirs to the thrones of the Federation and sequestered them in a private level of Herinak Castle in Korocca. Zack Nolan, the Alcean spymaster, began a campaign of disinformation intended to not only deceive the Federation, but also to create dissention among the ranks of the enemy army.

Meanwhile in Alcea, King Arik's faithful are designing traps to ensnare portions of the invading armies. While this strategy will lessen the impact of the invading hordes, the Alceans will still be woefully outnumbered.

Chapter 1

Sowing Fear

The sergeant opened the door to the tavern in Valdo and stepped into the dimly-lit room. He paused for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the darkness as he scanned the tables looking for a likely target. As was customary, many of the patrons glanced towards the door to see who had entered the establishment. More than a few eyes lingered on the newcomer far longer than necessary to determine if a friend had arrived. Some of the patrons noted the long, nasty scar that ran from the sergeant's temple to his jaw. Others smiled knowingly at the sergeant's full beard, recognizing it as an obvious attempt to lessen the visual impact of the man's scarred flesh. There was a twinge of sympathy from some, but most were apathetic to the sergeant's misfortune. But it was neither the scar nor the beard that set the sergeant apart from a normal visitor to the tavern. It was the patch on his uniform. The patch of the 15th Corps of Ertak was seldom seen in the city of Valdo. In fact, there had always been a bit of a rivalry between the soldiers of Spino and those of Ertak.

The sergeant ignored the stares, and locked his eyes on a table where two corporals belonging to Spino's 21st Corps sat talking quietly. He made his way across the room and sat across the table from the two corporals. The men were among those few who had not bothered to gaze upon the newcomer, and they were so deep into their discussion that they did not even acknowledge the sergeant's arrival at their table. The sergeant sat quietly, listening to the conversation that centered on the coming war. He did not offer his own thoughts. Indeed, he purposely appeared not to be listening, a man lost in his own thoughts. The serving girl came by, and the sergeant ordered a pitcher of mountain ale. That simple act caught the attention of his two table-mates. The corporals looked across the table, seemingly noticing the sergeant for the first time.

"Gold to burn?" asked one of the corporals.

"What's an Ertakan doing in Valdo?" asked the other.

The sergeant raised his eyes from the table to look at the two corporals. He smiled thinly at their comments.

"Valdo has always had the best ale," he commented. "Besides, the gold is not mine. Why shouldn't I enjoy the best?"

The serving girl returned with the pitcher of special ale and set it down on the table. The sergeant filled his mug and casually waved

towards the pitcher.

"You are welcome to share my ale if you wish," he offered.

The two corporals looked at each another with skeptical expressions.

"What's the catch?" one of the corporals asked.

"No catch," smiled the sergeant. "I travel frequently from Farmin to Despair, and the colonel gives me a generous travel allowance. I always try to stop in Valdo on the way through. Drink up and enjoy yourselves."

Both of the corporals smiled broadly and filled their mugs.

"We don't often meet friendly Ertakans," offered one of the corporals. "Be careful or you will spoil your country's reputation."

The sergeant laughed and nodded. "Truth be told, I was born in the Bloodwood. It might have been on the Ertak side of the border, but not by much. I probably have more in common with the men of Spino than my own countrymen. Ertakans actually think the Dark Forest is beautiful. They have never enjoyed a good romp in the Bloodwood."

"Here, here," one of the corporals heartily agreed.

"What takes you to Despair so often?" asked the other corporal.

"Intelligence," the sergeant answered. "General Montero wants to be kept up-to-date on the Alceans. He doesn't like surprises in the field."

"Really?" the corporal responded with interest. "So you know a lot about Alcea and what it is like? Can you share what Despair has told you?"

The sergeant frowned heavily and hesitated to answer.

"You can't be asking the sergeant things like that," scolded the other corporal. "You'll get him in trouble. Drink his ale and be happy."

The sergeant sighed and smiled slightly. "The truth is, Despair has little to offer about Alcea. I carry a lot of information about troop strength and matters concerning the disposition of the 15th Corps, and I cannot speak of that, but they say little about Alcea."

"Perhaps they don't know much about it," suggested one of the corporals. "I heard they sent some colonels there just a little while ago."

"That is true," replied the sergeant, "but they were not the first scouts we sent to Alcea. I spent over a year in Alcea, and that was two years ago. We have been planning this invasion for some time."

"Really?" one of the corporals asked excitedly. "Tell us about it."

Again the sergeant hesitated, but this time the other corporal did not interrupt with any admonishments about the need for secrecy. When the sergeant still hesitated, the first corporal pushed further.

“Two years ago is a long time. Surely, there can be no reason for secrecy at this point. Tell us about Alcea. What are their armies like?”

“And their women?” chuckled the other corporal. “What are they like?”

The sergeant made a point of glancing around the room to see if anyone else was listening to the conversation. While there was no one else listening, his gesture accomplished what he had desired. Both corporals were suddenly aware that they were about to become privy to something secret.

“Their armies are small, but formidable,” the sergeant said softly. “Our generals will stress the small part of that, but we are in for a fight when we get there. The Alceans are a warlike people. Remember, Alcea is about the same size as all of Zara, and it is a single country. That didn’t happen peacefully. Think about the years of warfare something like that would require right here in Zara.”

“The Federation almost covers the entire continent,” frowned one of the corporals. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Hardly,” scoffed the sergeant. “The rulers here in Zara are meek compared to the Alceans. They fought bloody wars over there for years. About four years ago, they ended the last war. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers from all over the continent were pitted against one another. Say what you will about the Alceans, but they know how to fight. Even if we do outnumber them, they will give us a decent challenge.”

“Well, we are up for any challenge,” boasted one of the corporals. “The world has never seen an army the size of the Federation. Nothing can stand in our way.”

“I would agree with that,” sighed the sergeant, “if it were not for…”

The sergeant suddenly stopped talking and looked around the room again. He returned his eyes to his mug of ale and stared into it. Several long moments passed by in silence. Eventually, the corporals could not stand the silence.

“Were not for what?” probed one of the corporals.

The sergeant looked up and stared blankly into the face of the questioning corporal. He did not speak.

“Yeah, what is it that you fear to talk about?” pushed the other corporal.

The sergeant’s eyes flicked towards the questioning corporal and then glanced around the room again.

“You will not repeat what I am about to say,” the sergeant said in a soft, but stern voice. “If the officers hear you repeat my words, they will take steps to punish you severely. There are some things about Alcea that they do not want the soldiers to know.”

“We will keep your words to ourselves,” promised one of the soldiers.

The sergeant sighed and hesitated again, but eventually he leaned towards the corporals and spoke softly.

“Beware the dwarves!

One of the corporals blinked as if not believing his ears. “What? What are you talking about? There are no dwarves. There haven’t been any for hundreds of years.”

“He’s playing with us,” the other corporal offered, his voice wavering between humor and fear.

“No one in Zara has seen dwarves for hundreds of years,” the sergeant continued, “but in Alcea it is different. There the dwarves have flourished, and they are the most ferocious of opponents. If you learn nothing else from our chance meeting, learn this. Beware the dwarves!”

“How bad can they be?” asked one of the corporals. “There are only so many things you can do with a sword, and the 21st Corps has many a good swordsman. I don’t think we need to fear dwarf or man. We will have the numbers to overpower anything they can throw at us.”

“Dwarves do not fight with swords,” corrected the sergeant. “They throw axes that will split your armored head in two, but their main weapon is the battleaxe, and most humans couldn’t even lift one. It is a fearsome weapon that can cleave a horse in two, but even worse is their armor. Dwarven armor is magically enchanted to withstand the mightiest blows. Try as you might, you just can’t harm the dwarves. They wade into your ranks, swinging those huge battleaxes around, and there is nothing you can do but run.”

“Surely, that is an exaggeration?” posed one of the corporals.

“I do not think so,” the sergeant replied with a slight shaking of his head. “The stories told in Alcean cities are that King Arik counted each of his dwarves as one hundred men. I didn’t believe those stories at first, but they were repeated in every major city in Alcea. Still skeptical, I visited one of the war burial grounds and asked to see a dwarven tomb. The groundskeeper laughed at me as if I was making a joke. When I assured him that I was serious, he explained to me that not a single dwarf had died during the Great War.”

“A hundred to one?” gasped one of the corporals. “Ten dwarves could take on a whole company? A hundred dwarves could defeat an entire army? I cannot imagine a creature so invincible.”

The sergeant remained silent, his grim face giving credence to the warning. He could see the fear rising across the table from him, and he knew that it was time to move on. He waited patiently for the question that he knew would eventually be asked.

“I hope we don’t run into any of them,” the other corporal said, his voice quaking with fear. “Which lands over there are dwarven?”

“The dwarves are usually found in Sordoa,” answered the sergeant, “just south of Trekum.”

The corporals swallowed hard and stared at each other in alarm.

“That is where we are going!” exclaimed one of the corporals.

Zackary Nolan nodded sympathetically and stood to take his leave. His message was meant explicitly for the men of the 21st Corps, and he smiled inwardly having delivered it properly. He leaned down and whispered once more before turning and leaving.

“Beware the dwarves!”

The sergeant left the tavern and headed for another to continue sowing fear of the dwarves, dwarves that he knew would one day soon be pitted against the men of the 21st Corps. The sergeant had only walked two blocks before a young corporal from the 15th Corps fell in alongside him. The young corporal was one of Zack’s Zaran confederates, and he was also spreading fear about the dwarves.

“How did it go?” the sergeant asked the corporal.

“It went well,” grinned Bork. “By morning the whole garrison will be talking furtively about the possibility of going up against the dwarves.”

“As long as the tales do not make their way to the ears of the officers,” cautioned Zack. “You did warn them that their officers would punish them?”

“I did,” Bork assured the Alcean spymaster.

“Excellent,” smiled the sergeant. “Be off with you to another tavern.”

“There is something else that requires your attention this night,” stated Bork without breaking away from the sergeant’s side. “Cobb thinks he has found that special someone that you have been looking for.”

“Oh?” Zack halted and turned to face the corporal. “Tell me about it.”

Bork looked around to see if anyone was within hearing before speaking softly.

“The man is a sergeant in the 16th Corps under General Vladin. He makes numerous trips into the Royal Palace as part of his duties.”

“That works for the plan,” stated Zack. “What is the hook?”

“He has a gambling problem,” answered Bork, “a big gambling problem. He has been borrowing gold out of the paymaster’s funds when no one is looking. He has always managed to replace the stolen funds before the soldiers returned from the field, but things have gotten out of hand. He lost big today, and tonight he learned that the soldiers will be returning tomorrow, several days ahead of schedule.

He does not have the gold to replace what he stole."

The Alcean spymaster frowned as he stared at the ground. Bork knew Zachary well enough not to interrupt. He waited patiently for Zack to contemplate the next move.

"He must have been drunk to share that information with Cobb," Zachary eventually said. "Stealing from the paymaster earns a very public hanging in the Federation."

"He is very drunk," admitted Bork, "and very scared, but you taught Cobb and me well. The man holds a slim hope that Cobb can come up with a plan to save his neck."

"How much does he need?" asked Zack.

"Five thousand."

Zack whistled softly. "Our thief has expensive habits. That is actually a plus. It shows that he has been living on the edge for some time without getting caught. He must be fairly good at hiding his emotions. Take me to him."

Bork nodded and led the sergeant through the streets of the city until they came to the Journey's Rest Inn, a modest inn for the budget conscious traveler. Zachary had rented rooms there for his military persona, while he also had rooms at the Greystone Inn for his Lord Zachary persona. Bork led the spymaster up the rear stairs and knocked softly on the door to Cobb's room. Cobb immediately opened the door and admitted his two confederates.

Sitting on the couch was a rumpled sergeant wearing the patch of the 16th Corps. He rose unsteadily as the two men entered the room, fear etched into his face. Zachary smiled at the man and crossed the room. He sat in a chair facing the couch and waved for the man to sit down.

"I understand that you have a problem," opened Zachary. "I might be able to help you, but my help doesn't come without conditions."

The Spinoan sergeant swayed unsteadily and sort of fell into a sitting position on the couch, his head turning from side to side trying his best to focus on the new arrivals.

"I will not deal with a drunk," scowled Zachary. "Get this man sobered up."

"I have been trying," sighed Cobb as he shoved another cup of coffee at the drunk sergeant.

Zack stood and removed his pack. As he rummaged through the pack he ordered Bork to get some cold water and an empty bucket. The former caravan warrior returned moments later with two buckets, one filled with icy cold water. Zack took the empty bucket from Bork's hands and handed it to the drunk sergeant.

"Hold that between your knees," Zachary scowled at the drunk,

“and swallow this.”

Zachary roughly tilted the man’s head back and poured the contents of a small envelope into the man’s mouth. He grabbed the cup of coffee from the table and poured enough into the man’s mouth to make him swallow. The drunk sergeant offered no resistance. Zack released the man’s head and stepped back. He walked to the door leading to the corridor and motioned for his men to gather around him.

“I am going to another tavern for a while,” Zachary said softly to his two comrades. “When he vomits, make sure it gets into the bucket. When he is done, toss half the bucket of water into his face and use the rest to clean up. One of you come get me when he is sober enough to talk. I will not be far away.”

The Alcea spymaster left the room and headed for the closest tavern that catered to soldiers. He had no success in getting anyone to talk about Alcea and decided to try yet another tavern, but Bork found him when he stepped out onto the street. The two men returned to the Journey’s Rest Inn. Zack eyed the Spinoan sergeant and found the man glaring back at him.

“I’m sure glad you are not one of my normal drinking friends,” growled the Spinoan. “What was that stuff you forced down my throat?”

“I do not drink with thieves,” Zachary shot back, “especially thieves that talk freely when they are drunk.”

The Spinoan sergeant rose to his feet, anger and fear forcing the drunkenness from his mind.

“I thought I was talking to a friend, but obviously I was wrong.” He turned and glared threateningly at Cobb as he started making his way towards the door to leave the room.

“Sit!” Zachary commanded with an authoritative tone. “If I wanted you dead, I merely had to report your little indiscretion to the paymaster. I am sure that there would have been a reward for such a deed.”

The Spinoan sergeant hesitated and glanced at the Ertakan sergeant.

“Why didn’t you report me?”

“I can make your troubles go away,” Zachary replied with slight smile. “Sit down,” he said in a softer tone.

The Spinoan sergeant stood unmoving for a moment and then returned to the couch and sat down. Zachary reached into his purse and extracted five one-thousand-gold coins and placed them on the table. The Spinoan’s eyes widened at the sight of the small fortune sitting on the table. His eyes darted around the room as if to gauge the potential for grabbing the coins and bolting out the door. With a sigh,

he nodded and returned his attention to Zachary.

"Who do I have to kill?"

"I will get to that in a moment," replied Zack. "What is your name?"

"Batt," answered the Spinoan, "Sergeant Batt, 16th Corps."

"I have been told that five-thousand will save you from the hangman, is that correct?"

"That's the truth of it," sighed Batt, "but I don't know about killing someone to get the gold. I am a soldier, not an assassin."

"Well," shrugged Zachary, "that is your choice, but I am not giving you the gold just to be friendly. If you take my money, you will do as I say, or you will die a most painful death. If you have any intention of trying to cheat me, hanging would be the much wiser path for you to take."

"Not saying that I would even think of cheating you," probed Sergeant Batt, "but I can't help noticing your Ertakan patches. You can't possibly believe that you would ever find me if I chose to hide in this city. I would only have to hide until your unit is called up for the war."

"I won't be going to Alcea," smiled Zachary. "I am on special detail to the Royal Palace in Farmin. As for finding you, I would have no trouble at all. I have probably spent as much time in Valdo as you have. Besides, with enough gold, I can buy anything, including the location of your hiding spot."

"If you had enough gold," Batt grudgingly conceded. "You can buy anything in Valdo with gold, even friends."

Zachary reached into his purse and placed another five one-thousand-gold coins on the table. Batt's eyes widened at the show of wealth.

"That will be your bonus for completing the task assigned to you. It is enough money to take you wherever you want to go, but you will not receive the second pile until you have been successful."

"Ten thousand in gold?" joked Sergeant Batt. "What do you want me to do, kill the queen?"

No one laughed at the joke, and Sergeant Batt suddenly felt a knot in the pit of his stomach. He started shaking his head vigorously.

"Forget it! I may be a thief, but I am not a raving lunatic. That would be suicide. Forget it! I might as well be hanged now and get it over with."

"You have access to the Royal Palace," Zack said softly. "You can do it and get away easily."

"Easily?" balked Batt. "Are you crazy? Do you have any idea what security is like around the queen?"

"Actually," smiled Zack, "I do know. If I had easy access to the

palace, I would not be here talking to you. I would just do it myself. I can tell you how to do it, when to do it, and most importantly, how to get away with it."

Sergeant Batt's gaze alternated between the door and the piles of gold. The wealth on the table eventually intrigued him enough that he chose to stay.

"Tell me how I can do this and get away with it."

Zack smiled and revealed his plan. While the Spinoan was initially skeptical, he soon started nodding in agreement to the plan. Several hours later, Sergeant Batt picked up his gold and an Ertakan military patch and left the room. Zachary took the second pile of coins and returned them to his purse.

"I don't get it," frowned Bork. "I can't possibly see Batt getting away with this. Oh, you made it sound easy, but I know from earlier discussions with you that things will not go as smoothly as you laid them out. Why waste the five-thousand in gold?"

"We can't lose on this one," chuckled Zachary Nolan. "There are only three possible outcomes. If he succeeds, we pick up our things and move on to Ertak. If he tries and fails, Queen Samir will have him tortured only to learn that the Ertakans hired him to assassinate the queen."

"What if he just never even tries?" asked Bork.

"Then we feed enough information to Queen Samir to have Sergeant Batt arrested and interrogated. It will produce the same effect as if he had tried and failed."

"So the only way he gets to live is if he is successful?" asked Cobb.

"No," Zack shook his head. "If he succeeds, we let General Vladin know who the assassin was. We want Spino blaming the assassination on Ertak. Sergeant Batt was already a dead man when you found him, Cobb. All we have done is made his death serve a purpose."

Chapter 2

Mistaken Valor

Theos stood in the shadows in the center of the city of Ur. The firebrand mage gazed across the street at the Old Keep where King Mectin lived. Because the king never left the confines of his stronghold, the Tyronian patriots were going to have to find a way to get inside when the time came for the rebellion. Storming the Old Keep could easily result in thousands of patriot deaths, so Theos was searching for an easier way. Infiltrating the enemy ranks had been ruled out as access to the fortress was tightly controlled. Only the most loyal followers of the young king were allowed entry.

When Theos had first arrived back in Ur, after being dismissed by Fakir Aziz, he would have boasted of his magical abilities and how he could easily breech the walls of the old fortress, but spending time with Karl Gree had changed him. The fiery, untamed temper that burned within Theos was now kept under control, most of the time. It was a constant struggle for the mage, but he knew that the stakes were high. As he had promised the Knight of Alcea, Theos tried to alter the plan each day to save one additional patriot life. As the days flew past, that task became harder and harder.

Today, Theos was looking for some flaw in the keep's design that could be exploited. Perhaps he would find a secret exit designed to allow the monarch to flee under siege, or maybe a weakness in the methods the keep's commander used to rotate his guards.

Theos had already circled the keep three times since dawn, and he had found nothing. To continue to linger in sight of the keep would only draw unwanted attention to himself, so the mage decided to take a break and walk around the city for a while. Perhaps getting his mind off of the keep for a few minutes would clear his head.

Theos sighed as he turned and walked away from the keep. His task would be so much easier if he could just get inside and look around. He had discussed this with Karl and Captain Marez, the leader of the Tyronian Patriots, but it had been ruled out as unworkable. Anyone who managed to get inside the Old Keep would surely die before coming out again and describing the layout of the fortress. Theos had suggested sending a fairy in to spy, but Karl had rejected that as well. In addition to the magical black-cloaks quartered inside the Old Keep, K'san, a demonkin, also lived inside. If a fairy were to get caught spying, more would be lost than the life of one fairy. If the

Federation learned of the Alceans' use of fairies, the little people would not be able to accomplish a tiny fraction of what they were doing. The existence of the fairies was one of the biggest secrets in the Alcean arsenal, and Karl was not about to endanger that advantage.

Theos wandered the streets of the city without a destination in mind. Time and direction had no bearing on the mage as his mind was locked in concentration on the vision of the Old Keep. Had the shouting not been so loud, Theos would never have been alerted to the commotion. The mage blinked and instinctively stepped into the shadows of a nearby alley. Less than a block away, two Federation soldiers had seized a civilian, and the citizens howled in protest. A large crowd started to form as citizens flowed towards the commotion. A whistle blew loudly and soon the sounds of approaching soldiers echoed off the walls of the alley. Theos felt his anger building as a squad of Federation soldiers raced by the alley, but he concentrated on holding his temper in check. It was difficult for the hotheaded mage as these were his people and he had taken a vow to eradicate the Federation and its soldiers.

The crowd shouted loudly as the soldiers formed a cordon around the captive and the two soldiers who had arrested him. Theos pulled his hood over his fiery red hair and eased out of the alley. It was not his intention to interfere, even though the sight of the brutal soldiers taking one of the citizens would have normally set him off, but his mind had been wrenched from its focus on the Old Keep, and he was curious about the commotion. By the time he reached the crowd, the citizens had quieted down, fearful of the soldiers taking their wrath out on the bystanders. Theos sighed in sympathy and was prepared to circle around the crowd and be on his way. That was when he heard the word patriot mentioned by one of the arresting soldiers. Normally the Federation called them rebels, not patriots. For the soldiers to use the word patriot indicated that the captive was a high-ranking officer in the rebel organization. Theos halted and turned to stare at the captive, who was facing away from him.

"Are you sure he is a patriot?" asked the sergeant of the squad of soldiers.

"We are positive," replied one of the arresting soldiers.

"We will get him into the Old Keep immediately," declared the sergeant. "King Mectin will be pleased."

"The king will most certainly be pleased," retorted one of the arresting soldiers, "which is why my partner and I will be taking him in. We did what was necessary to capture him. No one else is going to take the credit."

The sergeant glared at the arresting soldiers for a moment before shaking his head. "Neither of you are authorized to enter the Old

Keep. I will take the prisoner, but you can be assured that both of you will get credit for his capture."

"You just run ahead and tell King Mectin that we are bringing a patriot in," countered one of the arresting soldiers. If he doesn't trust us inside the Old Keep, he can just come out and fetch the prisoner himself. We are not turning him over to anyone but the king. This patriot probably knows the entire rebel organization. His capture is worth a great deal, and we mean to enjoy the benefits of his capture."

"I will have you working as sentries in the Barrier for this," spat the sergeant.

One of the arresting soldiers laughed. "Sergeant, I will outrank you before the sun sets. You won't be assigning me anywhere. If I were you, I would be careful about giving me such ideas."

The sergeant growled in defeat and turned to one of his subordinates. He sent the subordinate to the Old Keep to announce that his squad was bringing in a patriot. As soon as the chosen man was dispatched, the sergeant ordered his men to escort the two arresting soldiers and their captive. While the arresting soldiers would get the credit for the arrest, the sergeant planned to be included when the rewards were handed out.

As the arresting soldiers led the prisoner away, Theos finally got to see the prisoner's face. He knew the man to be a close confident of Captain Marez. A shiver raced up the mage's back as he thought about the implications of Artum's arrest. Artum certainly could lay out the entire patriot organization for King Mectin, and Theos knew that the prisoner would eventually talk, no matter how loyal he was. K'san had the ability to reach into people's minds and simply take what he wanted. Theos could not let that happen, but neither could he openly intervene. It was just that sort of intervention that he had been fighting against inside of him since he first arrived in Ur. If he did anything to stop the arrest, he would never get the chance to join in the rebellion, and the patriots would need his magical skills to succeed. Numbed with indecision, the mage cautiously followed the procession of soldiers towards the Old Keep.

The mage's wanderings had taken him almost to the city gates, and the trip back to the center of the city was slow. At each intersection, Theos looked around for any patriot that he could find. He desperately wanted to get word to Captain Marez, Karl, or Althea, but he saw no one that he could trust. The closer they got to the city center, the more agitated Theos became. By the time the Old Keep came into view, Theos was agitated beyond measure. If he was to make a decision, the time had arrived. In the end, he found the decision to be remarkably simple.

As the group of soldiers leading the prisoner started up the walk

towards the gates of the Old Keep, Theos halted and brought both arms up before him. Sheets of fire leapt from his fingertips, and he directed the twin attacks to the soldiers flanking the prisoner.

"Run to me, Artum!" Theos shouted. "Run to me!"

The flames immediately engulfed the two arresting soldiers, and Theos slowly spread his arms apart, moving the walls of flame away from Artum. This tactic forced the squad of soldiers to move away from the prisoner and the burning corpses of his captors, leaving Artum a clear path of retreat to Theos. Artum was momentarily dazed by the unexpected attack, and he looked around in wonder. When he finally realized what was happening, Artum started running towards Theos, but he never made it to safety. An archer on the walls of the keep let his arrow fly, and the shaft sunk deep into Artum's back. In a fit of rage, Theos swept his arms apart, engulfing the entire escorting squad in flames.

Horns blared from the towers of the Old Keep, and soldiers rushed out through the gates to attack the mage. Theos knew that his acts had broken his promise to Karl, and he knew that meant that he would not be involved in the rebellion of his homeland. That knowledge brought with it a level of rage that Theos had never felt before. Instead of retreating and running for his life, Theos stood his ground. He pointed his arms towards the soldiers pouring out of the Old Keep, and fire once more flared from his fingertips. Sheets of flame soared towards the keep and the charge halted. The soldiers scrambled to get out of the way, but few were fortunate enough to escape the onslaught. The stench of searing flesh and burning leather filled the air, and a cloud of smoke rose eerily skyward.

Unexpectedly, a powerful magical projectile flew past the mage's head so close that it ripped the hood off of his head, exposing his fiery hair for all to see. Theos instinctively erected a magical shield of defense and gazed through the smoky air towards the keep. In a crenel on the wall stood a black-cloak, and his face was masked with anger at having missed his target. Theos smirked as he raised one arm and let loose a spell of power. He knew that the black-cloak would have already erected his own magical shield, but Theos knew how to play this game. A powerful invisible force slammed into the wall just to one side of the black-cloak. A bystander might have scored the blast as a near miss, but it hit exactly where Theos had aimed it. The blast slammed into the stone wall with a force so powerful that it smashed a portion of the wall into small chunks of rock. Those small chunks of stone flew outward with the force of an explosion. While the black-cloak did indeed have a magical shield surrounding him, he had not planned on a physical attack. That failure cost the black-cloak his life as hundreds of chunks of stone tore into his body.

The firebrand's own shields were suddenly peppered with all sorts of magical projectiles. Theos scanned the ramparts again and located seven black-cloaks, well spaced out. His eyes also detected fresh troops rushing out of the keep to physically attack him. Knowing his magical shields were strong enough to weather the onslaught for a few minutes, he turned his attention to the rushing soldiers. He sent sheets of flame at the soldiers, but they had been instructed to use their shields to deflect the flames. While some of the soldiers fell, not all of them did. Theos quickly corrected his tactics and sent a small burst of invisible power towards the advancing troops. The bolts of energy smashed into the columns of soldiers, sending the head man of each column flying backwards with enough force to topple the entire column. Theos immediately returned to sending sheets of fire at the enemy. With the soldiers' bodies crumbled in heaps, the shields were no longer effective in stopping the flames from reaching their targets. Screams and howls of agony split the air as the soldiers burned to death. As Theos returned his attention to the black-cloaks on the ramparts, a tiny weight landed on his shoulder.

"Karl demands that you retreat immediately," Thimble said with a sense of urgency. "There are soldiers responding to the horns from every sector of the city. You have only moments before they are upon you. Flee now."

"I might as well finish what I started," scowled Theos. "I am no longer useful to the patriots, but I can save quite a few of them by diminishing the ranks of those they will have to fight later."

"It was not a request," retorted the fairy. "Karl is not willing to trade your life for a handful of soldiers. Retreat now!"

"And go where?" argued the raging mage. "They will hunt me down and that will imperil every single patriot."

"Retreat to the estate," answered Thimble. "Karl will take care of it from there. Do not delay! You have no time to think about this. Do as you are told."

Theos sighed wearily as the projectiles continued to smash into his magical shield. He knew that the shields would fail him soon, and the thought of hundreds of soldiers closing in on him shook the rage out of him. He realized that his capture could do as much damage as the capture of Artum, and he vowed not to be taken alive, but he would try to comply with Karl's directive. With another sigh of defeat, the mage halted his offensive spells. He quickly issued an incantation and a cloud of fog started appearing at his feet. The cloud grew rapidly and within seconds he was unable to see the Old Keep. The shouts of soldiers rang out from every direction, and Theos knew that he had waited too long to retreat. Within seconds, he would be surrounded.

“Drop your shields,” urged the fairy.

“What?” barked the mage.

“Drop your shields,” repeated Thimble, “and keep the fog pouring out.”

Theos shook his head in confusion, but he did as the fairy requested. As soon as the shields were down, he felt his feet leave the ground. Seconds later he heard the impact of two groups of soldiers colliding into each other in the thick fog below him. He listened to their shouted questions, but the sounds diminished as the fairy levitated him higher. In moments, he was standing on the roof of a building.

“Can you fly” chirped the fairy. “Or should I summon Karl’s unicorn for you?”

“I can fly if I transform into a bird,” answered Theos, “but the black-cloaks will probably detect that.”

“They are expecting you to fly away?” questioned the little green man.

“I would if I were in their place,” reasoned Theos. “After abruptly ending my attack, they would assume that I am attempting to flee.”

“Would they still monitor for flying spells if they could see you?” asked the fairy.

“That would be a waste of energy.” Theos shook his head. “But I cannot afford to fly away if they are staring at me. I would be followed and destroyed.”

“Unless what they were staring at was not really you,” grinned Thimble. “You forget that I can cast images of my memories.”

“You would be attacked instantly,” frowned Theos. “I will not risk your life for my foolish actions.”

“I will not be harmed,” boasted the fairy. “I will keep your image just out of range, and I will move it quickly. If your flight is swift, we will both be at Sidney’s estate in moments.”

The mage held a doubtful expression on his face, but the fairy grinned boldly with an aura of confidence that swayed the mage’s decision.

“How long do you need to get outside the fog and set up the illusion?” asked Theos.

“Count to one hundred and then fly like a bird. I will meet you at the estate.”

The fairy leaped into the air, and Theos began counting. An eerie silence had fallen over the central part of the city, a silence broken only occasionally as a soldier’s armor clanged against some unseen obstacle. Before Theos reached one hundred, shouts erupted from the direction of the Old Keep. He clearly heard shouts of his sighting. Still, he waited a few more seconds before casting the spell that would

transform him into a bird. Once he was committed to his avian form, Theos flew as fast as he was able. He soared upward through the cloud of fog and angled towards the Gulf of Ur. He did not want to lead them to the merchant's estate if someone was tracking him. Once he was over the gulf, he dove towards the surface of the water and skimmed over the waves. When he felt he was far enough away from the city, he banked sharply to his right and headed for the coast north of the city. As soon as he was over land, he landed and transformed back into a man. He would have a decent walk ahead of him, but it was worth it to shorten his flight. Plus, if he had been tracked, his landing would take the followers away from Sidney's estate rather than towards it. He definitely did not want to bring attention to that place. He had already caused too much of a ruckus for the patriots.

The walk to Sidney's estate was uneventful, but Theos walked slowly and cautiously, always prepared for an ambush. By the time he reached the estate, dusk was upon him. Karl Gree, Captain Marez, and Althea were waiting on the porch for him. None of them spoke until they were all safely inside. Althea sent one of the patriots to cancel the search that had been initiated to find him.

"What took you so long?" asked Karl. "Thimble expected you to be here when he arrived. We thought we had lost you."

"I flew north in case the black-cloaks were tracking me," explained the mage. "I didn't want to lead them here."

Karl nodded understandingly, but Captain Marez glared at the mage.

"Do you have any idea what you have done today?" snapped the leader of the Tyronian Patriots. "You cost us three good men and stirred up a hornets nest that will keep us hiding for weeks. Mectin will have his men combing the entire city until he finds you."

"I am truly sorry," frowned Theos. "I knew that I should not get involved, but once I saw Artum being dragged into the Old Keep, I could not ignore it. His knowledge of the patriots would bring about many deaths of my countrymen. I am sorry, but I would do it again. My only disappointment was that Artum died in my attempt to free him. An archer shot him in the back as he was fleeing."

"Your only disappointment?" huffed the captain. "You must learn to follow orders and nothing else. Were it not for you, Artum would be alive and well right now."

A mask of deep sorrow fell over the mage's face, but the mask was creased with confusion. "King Mectin would not allow Artum to live after he had the demonkin strip his mind. What you are saying makes no sense. And what did you mean by the loss of three men? Artum was the only one they had captured."

"The two soldiers escorting Artum were our people," Althea said

softly. “Their task was to gain entrance to the Old Keep by dragging in a top-level patriot. Artum volunteered to be the captive. He held barrel weed in his shackled hands.”

A look of shock and pain fell over the mage’s face, and he slumped into the nearest chair and placed his head in his hands. “This is why you asked me for the barrel weed?” he asked with a broken voice. “They were to think he was dead? How would you ever get the body out to feed him the pit berries? Without the pit berries, he would truly die.”

“It was all worked out,” Althea explained. “The two soldiers would take Artum directly to a cell and then report to the king. From what we have been able to learn about the inside of the Old Keep, the cells are in the lowest level, while King Mectin is in one of the highest. The soldiers being unfamiliar with the layout of the keep would naturally get a little lost on the way to reporting to the king. They would eventually be promised their reward and be sent back to bring the prisoner before the king.”

“When it was discovered that the prisoner had died,” added Captain Marez, “the soldiers were to carry the corpse out for burial rather than take him to the king. It was the only feasible way to get Artum out of the keep once we got him inside.”

“Artum would then be fed the pit berries,” interjected Karl, “and the three men would be sent away from the city until after the rebellion.”

“Then I have caused more damage than I could have possibly imagined,” sighed the mage. “I curse this gift of mine. Why couldn’t you have just left me in the battle today? Why couldn’t you have let me die ignorant of my stupidity?”

“It is neither your gift nor your stupidity that is causing the problem,” scowled Captain Marez. “It is your anger. I thought you were making progress with that, but it is over now. We cannot afford to have you around here. If you had kept your head covered, we might have been able to hide you until things died down, but there are precious few mages with fiery hair in these parts. They know who you are, Theos. You have to go.”

“I agree that Theos must leave Tyronia,” Karl frowned, “but you are not being fair to him. What he did today had nothing to do with his rage. Had it been his rage, the confrontation would have taken place far from the city center. Theos made a conscious decision to save Artum from interrogation, and based on similar knowledge to what he had at the time, I would like to think that I would have reacted the same. It took tremendous courage to pit himself against the entire keep, and he put his life on the line to protect the Tyronian Patriots. I think a large part of the fault for today’s fiasco rests in the

three of us for not letting Theos know what we were up to. While none of us expected him to get involved, we should have considered the possibility of him stumbling into our little act."

Althea nodded. "Not rage, but mistaken valor. I agree with Karl. I certainly wish Theos had not gotten involved, but he was brave to do so. The question now is where do we send him? To Waxhaw? Calusa?"

"No," Captain Marez shook his head. "While he is making great progress on his anger, I think it would be a mistake to place him in another country where the local patriots wear the uniform of the Federation. It is just asking for trouble."

"That only leaves the horse countries," frowned Althea. "There are no Federation troops there at all."

"I will not go into exile and sit out this war," scowled Theos. "You do not need to take it upon yourselves to plan my future. I started my plan for revenge alone, and I will return to that. Like it or not, I plan to take a lot of Federation soldiers with me on the way to my grave."

"Leave us," Karl said softly to Captain Marez and Althea.

Captain Marez looked Karl in the eye and nodded without argument, but Althea donned a hurt expression. Karl stared back with a steady resolve. Althea eventually smiled weakly and followed her brother out of the room.

"If you are going to try talking me out of attacking the Federation," Theos said when he was alone with Karl, "save your breath. You may be able to teach me how to control my anger, but you cannot make the cause of that anger disappear entirely. I will have my revenge on the Federation for their attacks upon innocent people."

Karl smiled. "From what I have heard, you got a fair start along that road today. At least one black-cloak is dead and over one hundred of King Mectin's guard, and you walked away without a scratch. All-in-all, I would consider that impressive."

"Don't forget three patriots," scowled Theos. "I certainly will never forget them."

"Only two," countered Karl. "You did not kill Artum, and he knew that he was risking his life for this mission. Theos, do not hold those deaths heavy in your heart. You had no way of knowing what we were doing. You should have been informed. The fault lies with us."

"A trivial distinction," sighed the mage. "You didn't ask the others to leave so that we can commiserate on my failure. If you are planning on trying to get me to give up my path, save us both the time and effort. My mind is made up."

"Actually," smiled Karl, "I have something in mind for you. How would you like to be somewhere where everyone wearing a Federation uniform is truly your enemy?"

“You mean like inside a Federation prison?” chuckled Theos.

“No.” Karl shook his head. “I am thinking of Alcea.”

“Your homeland?” balked the mage. “What would I do there?”

“What you do best,” grinned the Knight of Alcea. “Think of it as the two of us changing places for a while. I will work with your people, and you will work with mine. There will soon be sixty thousand Federation soldiers converging on Tagaret, and the Royal Sorcerer was recently killed by a demonkin. King Arik could use your magical talents, and you will have far more targets in one place than anywhere in Zara.”

“And your king would agree to this? Does he know of my struggle?”

“You are doing quite well with that,” Karl smiled, “but I would never speak for King Arik without his authorization. I spoke to him while we were waiting for you to return here. If you find this task acceptable, they are already waiting for your arrival.”

“They?”

“King Arik and Queen Tanya. I think you will like them both.”

“I already have sixty thousand reasons for liking them,” smiled Theos. “I accept.”

Chapter 3

Tales in the Snow

Janay, wife of Emperor Jaar, stood on the balcony of Herinak Castle and gazed down at the group of people beyond the city walls. Hundreds of children and adults were sledding in the snow, but her eyes were drawn to a small group of seven. Each of the seven was a resident of the Lair, a special level in the castle that was isolated from the rest.

"Are they having fun?" asked a feminine voice from behind Janay.

Janay turned around and saw an elderly lady enter the balcony. Janay had seen the woman around the Lair ever since her arrival. She did not know who the lady was, but Janay recognized a woman of great culture when she saw one. The woman's every movement spoke of grace, as if she had been groomed for a throne. Janay looked at her curiously.

"They are indeed having fun," Janay stated. "I apologize, but I can not remember your name."

"I have never mentioned it," smiled the queen as she walked to the edge of the balcony and gazed below. "Names are seldom used here in the Lair. They are not important."

"Not important, or too dangerous to mention?"

Queen Romani turned and glanced into Janay's eyes and smiled. "These are perilous times that we live in. Do not be concerned. There is not a person here who seeks to harm you or your daughters. You were brought here for your safety."

"So I have been told," frowned Janay, "but I have learned to be skeptical of those who hide the truth from me. Do you know Forshire?"

Janay intentionally left off Forshire's rank in the Federation army to gauge the response from the mysterious woman.

"I know him," answered the queen. "He is a good man." Queen Romani was perceptive enough to realize that Janay was getting too curious. She decided to drive the conversation towards the heirs. She turned away from Janay and focused on the group of seven far below. "They certainly do appear to be having a wonderful time. I am glad that they get along together."

Janay was not deterred. "They get along quite well. Perhaps too well. Rynda and Billy are becoming quite attached to each other, and I

do not feel comfortable when I do not know the true identity of the boys courting my girls."

"They are hardly girls any more," smiled the queen. "They have grown into wonderful young women. You should be proud of them."

"I am proud of them, but I am also protective of them as a parent should be. Who is Billy?"

"It is not my place to speak of such things," the queen responded cautiously. "Your daughters are not in any danger. Let them enjoy themselves. Spring is nearly here, and all will be revealed then."

"Do you know the true identity of all the people in the Lair?" persisted Janay.

Queen Romani sighed and nodded. "I doubt that your daughters have had much in the way of companionship, Janay. Let them enjoy what little time they have here. Do not push against a wall that will not yield. You will only wear yourself out."

"Meaning you will never yield?" scowled Janay. "I have been told that I am a guest here, yet I am treated as a prisoner. A woman in my position can accept that. It comes with marriage to a man such as my husband, but I will not lose control of my daughters. You have no right to conceal the truth from me. Put yourself in my place. What if those were your daughters down there, and you did not have any idea who their companions were? Do you really think that you would accept that? You would not. I do not know who you are, but I recognize a woman of quality when I see one. Tell me that I am wrong."

The attack was unexpected, and Queen Romani found herself nodding in agreement. "There is truth in your words," she conceded, "but you do not know what is going on in the world outside these walls. We are doing our very best to keep you and your daughters safe, but that requires that we do not let others know of your existence here. Do you have any idea what your husband would do if he discovered that you were living in Herinak?"

The scowl fell from Janay's face as she considered the words spoken. She had been fairly certain that she was in Herinak, but it was good to have that confirmed.

"He would demand our safe and immediate return."

"He is in no position to do such a thing," retorted Queen Romani. "If he did know where you were, he could not afford to let others know the location. Are you so quick to forget that you were kidnapped by Badgers? Do you not think that the Badgers might have confederates in Herinak who would be overjoyed to learn of your location?"

"Do you think he would do nothing?" frowned Janay. "You do not know my husband well."

“I think it is you, Janay, who does not know your husband well. The Federation would need very little excuse to attack the horse countries. If he learned that you were here, he would send the Federation armies against Korocca and Zarocca. He would not mention your presence here, but he would have special troops designated to retrieve you. Are your unwarranted feelings of unease worth starting a war over?”

“Jaar is not an evil man,” protested Janay. “Why would he attack the horse countries?”

“You have not been kept well informed of what is happening in the world,” answered the queen. “Are you aware that the horse countries are the only countries on the continent that your husband has not conquered?”

“That can’t be true. I would have been told if it were true.”

“Evidently, you were not told the truth. Karamin was the first to fall, over a year ago, followed closely by my own country. Tyronia was the last. The horse countries are the only holdouts now.”

A puzzled frown fell over Janay’s face. She could not imagine such news being kept from her, but Colonel Jurgon had grown quiet during the last few years. Could he have been trying to shield her from the truth for some reason? She let the woman’s words bounce around in her head for a while and then it struck her.

“You are Queen Romani. How is it that you are here?”

It had been a hunch on Janay’s part based upon the woman saying that she was from Vinafor, but Janay smiled at the woman’s response. The expression of shock on the queen’s face was all the proof that Janay needed. It also confirmed Queen Romani’s words. There would be no reason for the queen to be living here if she still ruled over Vinafor.

Queen Romani sighed. She knew that she had given herself away, and that there was no use in trying to cover it up now. “Pretty much the same way you got here. Some brave souls that I had never met spirited me away to save my life. I will forever be thankful to them.”

“As I should be to Forshire?”

“General Forshire risked his life to get you here. I might add that many men lost their lives in the process. You do indeed owe a great debt to them.”

“I do indeed,” admitted Janay, “but there is still a great deal that I do not understand. If my husband truly seeks to rule the world, and General Forshire is loyal to him, why would the general bring me here into the enemy’s lair?”

“You were not meant to come here,” answered Queen Romani. “General Forshire entrusted your safety to a loyal friend when your camp was attacked. That friend brought you here. The general had

intended to take you to Despair to be reunited with your husband."

"Yet I have seen General Forshire walk these halls," frowned Janay. "How can King Wendal allow an enemy general free access to such a sensitive place? And why hasn't General Forshire told my husband where I am?"

"General Forshire has told your husband that you are safe, but he has not told him where you are. He does not want to see war between the Federation and the horse countries."

"A loyal soldier who goes against the emperor's plans? That makes no sense to me. Either he is loyal, or he is not. Which is it?"

"There are many things that I cannot and will not go into," answered the queen. "Suffice it to say that he has delivered you someplace safe, and he is working hard to free your husband from captivity."

"Jaar is in trouble?" Janay said with concern.

"Grave trouble," nodded Queen Romani. "The Badgers were supposed to kidnap the entire family, but your son was not with you. They will not kill your husband until they are sure that his entire family can be eliminated, but they intend to keep Emperor Jaar under their control until that is accomplished."

"My son died years ago," lied Janay.

"Do not demand the truth from me and then repay me with lies, Janay," retorted the queen. "I understand that you are trying to protect your son, but we are not the ones trying to overthrow the empire by killing Jaar and his family. If we knew where your son was, he would be brought here to safety to be with you."

"I am sorry," Janay said softly. "I suppose that there are secrets that each of us must hold closely. Still, I need to know the truth about General Forshire. Samana, my eldest, is infatuated with him. I need to know if he is truly a good man, and from what I hear, he is a maze of contradictions."

"I believe him to be an excellent man," answered the queen as she turned away from Janay and stared down at the heirs, "but I would advise you to discourage your daughter. At this moment, General Forshire is working hard to free your husband, but I would be willing to wager that the general will not survive the coming spring. She would be wise to forget about him."

Janay nodded sadly and gazed down at her daughters. The seven youths were starting a new run down the hill. Harry and Bonnay were sharing a sled, as were Sam and Jeanie. Rynda was paired off with Billy, and Samana rode alone. The sleds raced down the slope, and the one carrying Harry and Bonnay flipped over at the bottom. Harry was thrown some distance and Bonnay scrambled to her feet and raced over to where the prince was sprawled.

“Are you all right?” Bonnay asked with concern.

Harry grinned broadly. “Stop mothering me,” he replied with a chuckle. “I am no longer brittle.” Harry jumped to his feet and picked Bonnay off the ground and whirled her around.

“So I see,” laughed Bonnay. “What do you say we take a break and have some hot cocoa?”

“An excellent idea,” Billy responded as he led Rynda towards Harry. “While Harry and I might be used to this cold weather, I am not sure that the others are quite as hardy. The cocoa will warm everyone up.”

“I could use some warming up,” replied Rynda. “I have never seen this much snow in all my life. I’m cold.”

The three couples grabbed their sleds and started making their way to a small stand set up outside the city walls. Samana followed quietly, pulling her own sled. Billy purchased the cocoa and carried it to a small table set up alongside the wall. Everyone sat down and started drinking, but Samana sat quietly, looking at each of the others in turn. To her eye, Billy and Jeanie appeared to be in their element, but neither Sam nor Harry appeared to be used to such weather. Being a southern girl herself, it made her curious.

“How much snow do you normally see each year, Sam?” she asked.

“Nothing like this,” Sam answered. “A few flurries once in a while, but this amount of snow is awesome.”

“How about you, Harry?” asked Samana.

Harry frowned at the question. When she had asked Sam it sounded like normal conversation, but when she asked him it seemed as if she was fishing for something.

“I can’t remember ever seeing this much snow,” he answered, “but I am curious why it matters. Can’t we just enjoy the snow without comparing it to other years?”

“I don’t think this year is typical anyways,” interjected Billy. “The early winter seems to be fiercer than anything I ever saw, and I am used to a lot of snow.”

Rynda looked at her sister curiously. She knew that Samana was after something, but she wasn’t sure what it was. “What is the real question, Samana?”

“I would think that the real question would be obvious,” Samana replied. “Look at each other. Look closely. Bonnay has Occan features, but none of the rest of us do. Aren’t any of you curious who we all are?”

“Such topics are off-limits,” warned Harry. “You should know that.”

“I know that we are not to let others know who we are,”

countered Samana, “but that should not include each other. We all occupy the same lair. Why shouldn’t we know about each other?”

“Because it is forbidden,” answered Harry. “There are reasons for the rules given to us, and I will not abuse the hospitality given to me.”

“I thought I was the only stranger here,” frowned Billy. “Now that Samana has pointed it out, I am curious, too.”

“You were just the last to arrive,” stated Samana. “Who are you, Billy?”

Billy really had nothing to hide, so he answered. “I am Bultar. I am from Candanar.”

“Prince Bultar?” asked Rynda.

“Yes,” the prince answered meekly. “Does that make a difference between us?”

“Hardly,” grinned Rynda. “Samana and I are the daughters of Emperor Jaar.”

Harry and Sam looked at each other with anxious gazes.

“We shouldn’t be talking about this,” warned Jeanie. “Nothing good will come of it.”

“Oh?” retorted Samana. “And what country are you a princess of?”

“She’s Tyronian,” offered Rynda. “I heard her talking about the Ur Woods.”

“Princess Jeanel,” smiled Samana. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance.” Samana turned to gaze at Harry, expecting him to be the next to reveal himself, but Bonnay interrupted.

“I am not a princess,” Bonnay declared. “My father is a minor baron in Zarocca. I think that ruins your theory about everyone here being royalty of some kind. Let’s just drop the interrogations and enjoy each other as friends.”

Sam had not heard Bonnay’s words. His eyes were staring at Princess Jeanel with adoration. He had feared that assuming the throne of Spino would mean having to forego his love for Jeanie, and it had torn him apart each night. His mouth widened in a broad smile as he looked into her eyes.

“I am Prince Samuel of Spino, and I love you.”

Princess Jeanel grinned and wrapped her arms around Prince Samuel.

“That, Harry, makes you Prince Harold of Ertak,” declared Samana. “Am I wrong?”

Harry sighed and shook his head. “What is the point of these revelations, Samana? You are purposely breaking all of our vows. There are reasons for the secrecy surrounding the Lair, and those reasons are more important than our curiosities. Have you given any thought to what effect this knowledge would mean to the poor people

of Herinak who have been gracious enough to keep us safe?"

"You misunderstand me, Harry," replied Samana. "I do not mean for this knowledge to leave the Lair. I just think we need to be open and honest with each other."

"Why would our identities cause harm to the people of Herinak?" asked Rynda.

"Because your father would order his armies to crush the horse countries if he discovered any one of us here," scowled Harry. "Are you totally unaware of what is happening in the world, or are you intentionally trying to sound ignorant?"

"What are you talking about?" snapped Samana. "I know that my father would be anxious to have Rynda and me return to Despair, but why should he care about the rest of you being here?"

"The Federation and the horse countries are enemies," Prince Samuel said softly. "Did you really not know?"

Samana and Rynda looked at each other in disbelief. "I don't believe you," scowled Samana.

"It is true," stated Prince Harold. "Both King Harowin and General Montero would kill thousands to get their hands on me right now, and I am quite sure that Emperor Jaar would agree with them and aid them. The Koroccans are taking a huge risk by sheltering us here, and I do not think we are repaying them properly by abusing their hospitality."

"The same goes for Queen Samir," nodded Prince Samuel. "Hopefully she has not even discovered that I have left Spino, but if one word were to reach her ears that I was living in Herinak, she would demand that the Federation attack."

"We truly did not know," Rynda said apologetically. "We have not heard about any hostilities between the Empire and the horse countries. Why are they enemies?"

"The Federation is trying to conquer the world," offered Princess Jeanel. "If you do not know of such things, then you have been sheltered from the truth for some time. Are you aware that the Federation has taken over Karamin, Vinafor, and Tyronia?"

Samana and Rynda shook their heads, their faces betraying their amazement. Samana looked to Prince Bultar for confirmation. The Prince of Candanar nodded.

"Karamin and Vinafor fell last year," he stated. "Tyronia was the last to fall. There have been rumors of an attack on the horse countries, but I understand that the invasion fleet was destroyed last year by rebels."

"It seems that we truly have been kept in the dark," sighed Samana. "I wonder if mother knows about this?"

"She would have told us." Rynda shook her head. "I am sure that

she is as much in the dark as we are."

"All of this gives me pause," frowned Prince Bultar. "I know why I am here. I was rescued from a deadly snowstorm, and I am grateful for the rescue, but it appears too much of a coincidence that we all are gathered here together. Do you think the Koroccans are holding us hostage to avert a war?"

"No," Prince Harold said quickly. "In fact, that is the very reason that they have us isolated. They do not want the Federation to know that we are here, and they fear Federation spies among the populace. That is the reason for the false names, and why I have been urged to change my appearance. If there is the slightest chance that any of us will be recognized, Baron Stikman will confine all of us to the lair."

"Then why are we here?" asked Prince Bultar.

Prince Harold knew better than any of them, but he did not speak.

"A war is coming," offered Prince Samuel, "but not the war any of you think is coming. There is another country far across the sea, and the Federation also seeks to conquer them."

"What country?" asked Samana.

"It is called Alcea," answered the Prince of Spino. "As I understand it, the Alceans are grossly outnumbered, but they are an optimistic people. One of them came to the monastery where I lived and spent some time to get to know me. He questioned me about many things and challenged me about others. When he felt confident that I would rule Spino in a way that would benefit the citizens, he revealed himself to me. The Alceans want just rulers for the nations of Zara. I suspect that is the reason for protecting us. The Alceans want to make sure that we survive the coming war."

"Bah," scowled Prince Bultar. "I cannot imagine a government such as the one you describe. If the Alceans win the war, they will install puppet monarchs to rule as the Alceans see fit."

"You are wrong, Bultar, "declared Princess Jeanel. "I have also met some of these Alceans. They are the most noble of people. They saved my life and the life of my father, and they asked for nothing in return. When Tyronia is liberated, King Myer will assume the throne, with no strings attached, which is the only way my father would ever rule."

"I agree," stated Prince Harold. "I was on the verge of death when the Alceans came to me. They healed me, which none of the Federation mages were able to accomplish. But even then they made it clear that I was free to do whatever I wanted. They hoped that I would assume the throne and treat my citizens as people should be treated, but it was not a requirement of their healing. Before I was healed, I expressed a desire to merely go somewhere where no one

knew me that I might live out my days in peace and obscurity. They told me that if that was my choice, they would honor my wishes. I could walk out of Herinak Castle today and be free if I wished."

"You would be most welcome in Zarocca," smiled Bonnay. "If that is your desire, I will speak to my father. I am certain that he would welcome you to his barony without question."

"I am not prepared to leave Herinak Castle at this time," answered Prince Harold. "I have read enough to know that the situation in Ertak is horrible. The people are starving and crime is rampant. People are dying of diseases at an alarming rate, and yet we continue to build the largest army ever seen in history. If I can change that in some way, I would feel obligated to try."

"You are a fool," laughed Prince Bultar. "Do you really think the Federation would stand for a young upstart telling them what to do? You would be crushed in an eye-blink."

"Perhaps," frowned Prince Harold, "but I am not a coward who will change sides solely because it is expedient." Prince Bultar recoiled at the verbal slap, but Prince Harold continued. "I will stand for what is right in the world, or I will not stand at all. I have been staring into the face of death for many years, Bultar. It no longer scares me. It is, in fact, the fear of death that is debilitating, not death itself. When my death arrives, I will die with a smile on my face knowing that I have done some good that will hopefully be remembered and imitated for generations to come."

Bonnay applauded and Prince Samuel and Princess Jeanel smiled broadly, but Prince Bultar was scowling.

"Is that how Ertakans see us in Candanar?" he asked.

"No personal offense meant, Bultar," interjected Princess Jeanel, "but Candanar has a reputation for going along with whoever is the strongest at the moment. If I remember correctly, Candanar did not request to join the Federation. You were told to join the Federation while your borders were threatened by Federation troops. Am I mistaken?"

"But it was an unnecessary provocation," countered Prince Bultar. "My father was already thinking of joining the Federation. He just hadn't made up his mind yet."

"It was probably a wise decision at the time, Bultar," stated Prince Samuel, "but it is typical of Candanar behavior over the centuries, and maybe that is as it should be. Candanar is a sparsely populated country in the crossroads of the continent. I imagine a defiant stance in the past might have resulted in the demise of your country, but that is no reason to ridicule Prince Harold's taking of a firm stance in Ertak. Should I ever ascend the throne in Spino, and I must point out that such a situation is unlikely, I would support Prince

Harold as long as he truly stands for the betterment of the populace."

"And I would heartily accept such help," smiled Prince Harold, "and offer the same in return. Perhaps these Alceans are wiser than even I give them credit for."

"How do you mean?" asked Bonnay.

"From what I understand, the Alceans do not want war, but they will spiritedly defend themselves if attacked. Should they be lucky enough to be the winner of such a conflict, ruling over Zara from such a distance would be a difficult task. Wouldn't it be far easier for them to select rulers who would never threaten them again?"

"And open up trade routes between the two lands." Princess Jeanel nodded enthusiastically. "I think you have stumbled upon the true intent of the Alceans."

"But can they win the war?" asked Prince Samuel. "It does not look promising from what I have heard."

"I grow tired of all this speculation," frowned Samana. "You all act as if these mysterious Alceans are behind everything. I only need to point out that Alceans did not bring Rynda and me here. A Federation general rescued us from kidnappers. General Forshire would not be in league with Alceans."

Princess Jeanel's eyebrows rose. "General Forshire is an Alcean."

Samana's eyes widened with disbelief, but it was Prince Bultar who spoke.

"I thought General Forshire was Tyronian?"

"The real General Forshire was Tyronian," answered Princess Jeanel, "but he was a traitor to his country. He was in league with the Federation and tried to assassinate my father and me. There was an Alcean named Clint McFarren who had an uncanny resemblance to General Forshire. He helped us escape the assassination attempt and killed General Forshire. He then had his face magically altered to assume General Forshire's identity."

Rynda looked at her sister. "You are in love with an Alcean? What will father say?"

Samana rose to her feet as the shock of the truth hit her. Tears filled her eyes, and she turned and ran away from the others. Sitting on the wall over the heads of the heirs, a tiny winged-woman slowly rose to her feet and took to the air to make her report.

Chapter 4

Shadows in the Night

Colonel Donil of the A Corps sat on a bench overlooking the Sea of Tears. With his back to the Imperial Palace, he could easily be spied upon, but no one would see the tiny green man hiding in the hair near his ear.

"That is all I have to report at this time, Peanut," the colonel said softly. "Wait. That is not quite true. Inform the general that I have heard mention of a 38th Corps. I do not know the significance of this, but I have never heard of any armies beyond the 32nd Corps which occupies Tyronia. I have also seen more than one colonel enter the Imperial Palace and leave as a general. If you add these two together, it might indicate that Grand General Kyrga is still aggressively expanding the armies of the Federation. Ask the general if I should try to pry information out of Colonel Taerin about this. Do you have all of that, Peanut?"

"I will remember every word," chirped the fairy. "If you think of anything else, you can tell me in the morning. I am going to spend the night here."

"Where do you sleep when you stay overnight?" asked the colonel.

"There is a very comfy tree hollow over near the abandoned shed," answered Peanut. "It is warm and dry in all weather."

"You are welcome to stay in the barracks with me," offered the colonel. "There is plenty of room. I have the whole building to myself."

"Thank you," replied Peanut, "but I enjoy an occasional night with nature. Fairies were not meant to live in pockets, but we are often required to. I will see you in the morning."

Colonel Donil felt the fairy's tiny feet move about on his shoulder as Peanut checked to see if anyone was watching. The colonel sat unmoving until the pressure of the little feet disappeared, signaling the fairy's departure. The colonel sat for a while longer and then rose to head into the palace for the evening meal. He was not surprised to bump into Colonel Taerin on the way to the palace. Such an occurrence happened far too frequently to be coincidence, and Colonel Donil suspected that Colonel Taerin was probably spying on him.

"Enjoying the sunset again?" Colonel Taerin asked in a friendly manner.

“In a manner of speaking,” smiled Colonel Donil. “While the bench does not offer a view of the sunset, the sky over the Sea of Tears is often painted in beautiful colors. You should experience it some time.”

“You seem to mimic your master,” Colonel Taerin said with a slight smile. “He also liked to sit on that bench and meditate.”

“I will assume that you are referring to General Forshire,” retorted Colonel Donil. “As for the meditation, the bench does offer a secluded place to sit and think, and I find the gentle motion of the water soothing. Were you looking for me?”

“No one is looking for you here, Colonel Donil,” chuckled Colonel Taerin. “For most of the people in the palace, you don’t even exist. I am still confused why General Forshire left you behind when he departed for Olansk.”

“I try to make it a habit never to question General Forshire’s orders.” Colonel Donil smiled as he replied. He knew that Colonel Taerin was fishing for information. It was a game that Taerin often played. The manner was always cordial and friendly, but the questions always showed a bit of suspicion about the A Corps. Colonel Donil decided to take a slightly different tact than his usual bland response. “Perhaps General Forshire was hoping that my abilities would get noticed here at the Imperial Palace. I have heard that there have been a great many promotions lately.”

“I hardly think that is the case,” Colonel Taerin replied with a friendly chuckle. “I have seen your file, Donil. You were arrested for theft, insubordination, and striking an officer. You were fortunate to be merely sent to prison for such offenses. Why General Forshire saw fit to rescue you from prison and make you a colonel is quite a mystery. I hardly think Grand General Kyrga will try to outdo such a feat by making you a general and giving you your own army.”

“Perhaps that would be pressing my luck,” laughed Colonel Donil. “For the record, I did not steal anything. I was accused of stealing, and that accusation was the cause of the other charges. Still, you have a point. I will just have to be content to be a mere colonel.”

Colonel Donil was not surprised that Colonel Taerin had pulled his file and investigated his background. He would have done the same thing if he had the authority to do so. He also knew that Colonel Taerin did not really view him and the A Corps as poorly as he pretended. Others within the palace did, but Colonel Taerin was the exception. General Forshire had been correct. Colonel Taerin’s demeanor was disarming.

“I gather that you are heading indoors for the evening meal?” questioned Colonel Taerin. “Perhaps you would care to dine with me this evening?”

And be subtly interrogated, thought the A Corps colonel. It was an unexpected opportunity, and one that Donil was eager to accept, but he needed to be prepared for such an occasion, and he was not. “I would enjoy that very much, Colonel Taerin, but perhaps another time. I must confess to feeling a little under the weather this evening. I think I will just grab something light from the soldiers’ mess and return to the barracks. Were you to extend the same offer tomorrow, I would readily accept.”

“Then tomorrow it shall be,” smiled Colonel Taerin. “I hope you are feeling better by then.”

Colonel Taerin nodded in farewell and separated from the A Corps colonel. Donil’s presence at the Imperial Palace intrigued him. When General Forshire stayed at the palace, he always had a reasonable explanation for his presence, but he was a general. Colonel Donil had no official reason to be on the grounds other than his stated orders to wait for Forshire’s return. While such an order might be acceptable for a squad leader, a colonel was much too important to waste. That indicated a much more nefarious reason for the colonel’s presence, and Taerin planned to discover the truth.

Instead of heading directly towards the officers’ mess, Colonel Taerin climbed the stairs to the second floor and made his way to a balcony overlooking the grounds closest to the old barracks. He wanted to see if Colonel Donil really did return to the barracks as promised. To his surprise, the A Corps colonel soon appeared carrying a plate of food. Although the balcony did not offer a view of the actual barracks, it was clear to Colonel Taerin that Donil was indeed heading there to eat. With a sigh of disappointment, Colonel Taerin left the balcony to procure his own food.

Colonel Taerin ate in uncharacteristic silence. He politely spurned offers of companionship as his mind tried to solve the mysteries of A Corps. While Colonel Donil’s presence on the palace grounds was certainly odd, he had found the colonel to be surprisingly friendly, hardly what he had expected from a convict. He had enjoyed the colonel’s observations of Alcea and found the man to be quite an intelligent thinker. That made Forshire’s decision to abandon him on the grounds of the Imperial Palace even more curious. Colonel Taerin was convinced that Donil was meant to spy on the Imperial Palace, but why? Who was it that General Forshire did not trust? He had had several confrontations with Grand General Kyrga, but General Forshire always seemed to best the Grand General in the end. The Tyronian also seemed to have the ear of the emperor, and Colonel Taerin could not think of anyone else of importance that Forshire had come into close contact with. It was a maddening puzzle, and it drew on Taerin’s attention like an irresistible magnet.

Colonel Taerin finished his meal and wandered around the halls of the palace for a while. Eventually, he turned in for the night, but his sleep was troubled. Like an attack dog with its teeth sunk deep into the flesh of its prey, Colonel Taerin could not simply let go of the mystery and walk away. Sometime in the middle of the night, Colonel Taerin awoke with a start. He did not know what had awoken him, but one thought was suddenly clear in his mind. Colonel Donil roamed the grounds of the palace during the day with a seeming lack of purpose and direction. The pattern was never the same except for his morning and evening relaxations at the bench overlooking the Sea of Tears, the very same bench that occupied General Forshire's daily routine. What if Colonel Donil's real mission was accomplished at night under the cover of darkness? The Palace had night patrols, but they were limited to stopping intruders from the outside. Colonel Donil would have much easier movement at night, although any attempted entry into forbidden areas would still be challenged and reported. Still, the thought nagged Colonel Taerin so much that he rose and dressed.

As the colonel stepped out of the palace, he glanced up at the night sky. The sky was heavy with dark rain clouds, obliterating the moon and the stars. While the rain had not yet started to fall, Colonel Taerin knew that it would soon. Already the damp vapors were licking at the lawn, and the air had a moist chill to it. The colonel stole off into the dark night, not taking a direct heading towards the barracks in case someone else was awake and staring down onto the grounds. He headed for the shoreline until he came to a tall row of hedges and then doubled back, using the hedges to hide his movements. He felt silly in a way, traipsing around in the middle of the night like some great spy, but he knew that he would not be able to get back to sleep until he verified that Colonel Donil was in his bunk sound asleep.

Coming to a break in the hedge, Colonel Taerin slipped through into a stand of fruit trees. He was now beyond sight of anyone in the palace, but he continued onward in a stealthy manner. As he neared the edge of the small orchard, he saw a light in the distance. He halted and stared at the light, trying to make sense of what he was looking at. It was a dim light, and he probably would not have even seen it on a normal moonlit night, but this night was dark and ominous. The colonel knew that he was staring in the direction of the barracks, but the light was too dim to be that close to him. It appeared weak and far away, yet that was impossible. Beyond the old barracks was a stand of tall trees that would block any lights from the rest of the grounds.

Staying in the relative safety of the trees, Colonel Taerin followed the curve of the orchard to get a better view of the mysterious light. A muffled thud split the silence of the night, followed closely by a cry of

pain. Colonel Taerin halted again and stared at the light. Only then did he understand what he was seeing. The light was coming from inside the barracks, and someone had left the door slightly ajar, allowing a faint trickle of light to seep outside. As he stared at the light, a dark figure moved across it. The slight sound of the door closing coincided with the disappearance of the light. A thrill ran through the colonel's body. His suspicions about Colonel Donil were proving to be correct. His activities were indeed taking place at night, and it appeared as if he had confederates on the palace grounds.

Colonel Taerin desired to get closer to the barracks to hear what was going on inside, but he was sure that someone was standing guard outside the door. The figure that closed the door could not have entered the building without first opening the door wider. That had not happened. The colonel stealthily reversed course and moved away from the front of the barracks. He followed the curving orchard until it ended and then dropped to the ground. He crawled slowly across the ground until he was sure he was not visible to the sentry in front of the barracks. He rose and moved silently towards the rear of the barracks. The windows of the barracks were shuttered, and the evening air had been cold enough that no one would bother to unshutter them Indeed, the barracks used for the palace guard often had blankets hung inside the windows to cut down on drafts. He expected the same from Colonel Donil at the old barracks.

Colonel Taerin made his way to one of the windows of the old barracks and pressed his back against the old building. He heard muffled voices coming from inside, but he could not hear the actual words spoken. Picturing the interior of the building and noting which bunk the colonel used, Taerin moved towards the front of the building, hoping that the conversation was occurring in that area of the building. Passing by another window, the colonel stopped at the third one. He heard nothing and frowned. Unexpectedly, he heard the slap of a palm upon flesh and a muffled cry.

"You are angering me, Donil," said an authoritarian voice. "I have no desire to harm you, but I will if you do not please me. Speak!"

"I have told you," Donil replied stubbornly. "I know nothing about any women. I know nothing about the A Corps attacking anyone in the west, and I have not heard anything about any losses from battle. What can I tell you when I know nothing?"

"Forshire has undoubtedly told his men not to speak of the women," said a third voice, "especially here at the Imperial Palace. This one will need some cutting before he realizes that we are not leaving without the location of the women."

"Where is Forshire right now?" asked the authoritarian voice.

"I am not exactly sure," answered Donil, "but I would suspect that

he is in Olansk. The general does not tell me what his plans are. He demands that I follow his orders."

"And what are his orders?"

"To wait here for his return. Nothing more."

"Liar!" scowled the third voice. "A colonel is not assigned to sit idle and do nothing. We will have those women back. Where are they?"

"I truly do not know what you are talking about," sighed Donil. "Look, I am an ex-convict. You should know that I would not endanger myself by refusing to give you what you want. If I knew where these women were, I would readily tell you, but I don't even know what women you are looking for. If you want, I will ask around and try to get you information, but you have to give me an idea of what you are talking about. I want to cooperate. Truly, I do."

The third voice started to talk again, but the authoritarian voice cut him off.

"Quiet! I will ask the questions." There was a short pause and the voice spoke again. "You had a mission a short while ago, Donil. You and a band of your misfits visited a certain estate in the foothills of the Barrier. You should remember the stench of the bodies on that estate. Either you tell me where the women are right now, or you will end up like Colonel Jurgon. Do I make myself clear?"

The sound of a sword being drawn drifted to Colonel Taerin's ears.

"You are wrong," Colonel Donil replied. "I have been in Despair for only a short while. Before that I was posted to a mission with the 1st Corps. If you don't believe me, you can ask Colonel Dorfan of the 1st Corps. When I returned to Despair, I saw General Forshire for only a few hours before he left for Olansk. I have no knowledge of his activities or what the rest of the A Corps has been doing in my absence. I was gone for almost two months."

"You went to Alcea?"

"You are well informed," replied Colonel Donil. "I was assigned to Force Targa."

The sound of the sword being sheathed reached Colonel Taerin's ears, and he knew that the interrogation was over. The question in Taerin's mind was whether they would kill Donil before they left or leave him alive. He feared the former, and he refused to allow that to happen. Colonel Taerin turned and raced into the trees. He brought a whistle to his lips and blew it loudly. Almost immediately the whistle was relayed all over the palace grounds as guard units rushed to respond to the alarm. He knew that the intruders, whoever they were, had very little time to flee. He hid in the darkness until he saw three shapes slip into the stand of tall trees beyond the barracks. Colonel

Taerin raced out of the trees and around the barracks to the front door. He threw open the door and stared into the dark interior.

"Are you alive, Donil?"

"Colonel Taerin? Did you sound the alarm?"

"Who were those men?" demanded Colonel Taerin.

"I have never seen them before," answered Colonel Donil, "but they certainly wanted me to believe that they were Badgers. Each of them wore a golden badger pin."

"Stay in this building, Donil. You are not to leave until I say so."

Colonel Taerin slammed the door and ran along the path towards the palace to put some distance between himself and the old barracks. He halted when the first group of guards encountered him.

"Was that your whistle?" asked the sergeant in charge of the group.

"It was," replied Colonel Taerin. "There are three assassins on the grounds. They are black-clad and masked. They were last seen entering the old forest section of the grounds. Have one of your men spread the description to the other units. I want them captured alive, but be cautious. I believe them to be Badgers."

One of the soldiers was dispatched to spread the description and the others hurried towards the last reported location of the intruders. Colonel Taerin turned around and walked back to the old barracks. He opened the door and stepped into Donil's quarters.

"Make a light, Donil. We have some talking to do."

Colonel Donil lit a torch and placed it in a wall sconce. Colonel Taerin could see that Donil's face was bruised, but he appeared otherwise unharmed.

"What is this all about, Colonel Taerin? If this is some kind of joke, I am not taking kindly to it."

"Badgers do not joke," Colonel Taerin replied as he sat on one of the bunks facing Donil.

"Badgers are a myth," Colonel Donil replied, his tone revealing the uncertainty of his words.

"They are no myth. You are lucky to be alive. They usually do not leave witnesses behind, but I suspect that they want word of this visit to reach the ears of General Forshire. It would appear that they suspect the general of interfering in their plans."

"You heard what they said?"

"I was outside the window." Colonel Taerin nodded, wondering how Donil would take the news that he was being spied on. "Why did Forshire leave you here?"

"If you were listening," frowned Colonel Donil, "then you heard my answers to the Badgers. Why ask the same questions when you

know the answers?"

"Because I doubt that you told them the truth. The loyalty the A Corps shows to General Forshire is remarkable. There is no way that you would tell the Badgers where the general could be found. That would endanger his life."

"General Forshire will not be harmed by the Badgers," retorted Colonel Donil. "Let the Badgers send their best to Olansk. They will be met with the steel of A Corps. They will have to cut through two-thousand men to get close to the general."

"I could easily believe that if I thought that the A Corps would even know that the Badgers were coming, but they won't know. They will be caught as unawares as the defenders of the Imperial Palace appeared to be this night."

"They'll know," swore Colonel Donil. "The A Corps will be waiting for the Badgers to appear."

Colonel Taerin smiled at his small victory. He suspected that Donil had some way of communication with General Forshire, and Donil's words confirmed it.

"Then the A Corps will be doing the Federation a great service. The Badgers deserve to die, but General Forshire will not be there to witness it."

"What do you mean?" Colonel Donil asked suspiciously.

"You are going to send a message to the general that he is to report to the Imperial Palace immediately. I want to speak to him personally."

"You are but a colonel," balked Colonel Donil. "You do not order a general around. Besides, how can I send a message to the general any quicker than you can? Send your own message."

"Do not try me." Colonel Taerin snapped in a most uncharacteristic manner. "I wish to speak to General Forshire alone, and I wish to do so immediately. Do not force me to involve Grand General Kyrga in this because he will have many questions that might prove to be very embarrassing to your general."

"Even Kyrga cannot order General Forshire to return to Despair," countered Colonel Donil. "Why is speaking to General Forshire so important to you?"

"Grand General Kyrga can order any general to do anything he wants. Are you daft?"

"Kyrga is indeed the Grand General, but he has no authority over General Forshire. General Forshire reports directly to the emperor. If you want him so badly, perhaps you should speak to Emperor Jaar."

Colonel Taerin was about to angrily respond when he suddenly fell silent. He let Donil's words roll around in his head. There was no known position reporting directly to the emperor, yet if there was one,

it might explain a great deal about Forshire's strange activities. He decided to change course.

"Look, Donil, I really need to talk to General Forshire. I am sure that he would agree to the meeting if I could get word to him. I know that you have such a method for doing so. I will not even inquire about your method of delivering such a message, but I ask you to send one as soon as you can. Something is not right in the Imperial Palace, and I think General Forshire can shed some light on it. Tell him that I will meet with him wherever he wants, and I will tell no one else about the meeting, but we must speak. It is urgent."

Colonel Donil merely nodded, and Colonel Taerin knew that was the best answer he would receive.

"Why don't you move into the palace, Donil? I will give you authorization to use General Forshire's suite until he arrives."

"I could not do so," Colonel Donil replied. "My orders were explicit. I am to stay here until I am told otherwise."

"The Badgers obviously have found a chink in our defenses," sighed Colonel Taerin. "They can easily come back for you. You are not safe out here."

"I do get that feeling," admitted Colonel Donil, "but absent permission from General Forshire, I am duty-bound to remain here."

"Very well," sighed Colonel Taerin. "I hope some day to learn how Forshire has instilled such loyalty in his men. I suggest you ask for permission to move into the palace when you send my message. I will leave the offer open. All you need to do is come to me and ask to move indoors. Your request will be granted."

Colonel Taerin turned and walked out of the building. He paused briefly outside as the thought of concealing himself came to mind. If he was clever enough, he might discover how Donil communicated with Forshire, but he soon gave up the thought. Donil would not send the message until he was certain of success without observation. All Taerin would accomplish would be a delay in sending the message, and he wanted it sent without delay. As the clouds opened up and rain started falling, Colonel Taerin ran towards the Imperial Palace to return to his room.

Chapter 5

The Archives

The thunderclap was so loud that it felt as if it shook the bed. Colonel Taerin bolted upright and listened to the sound of the rain pelting the building. He slid out of bed and eased the shutters open. The rain poured down so heavily that he could not see the palace docks. Pools of water dotted the palace grounds and small rivers flowed along the footpaths. He pulled the shutters closed and got dressed. He made his way downstairs to the officers' mess and found it packed with generals and colonels. He grumbled under his breath. While Despair was usually crowded in the winter because of its warmer weather, many of the senior officers usually stayed up late into the night and rose late in the morning, but the storm must have awakened every last one of them. He turned around and fled from the crowded room. With a slight smile on his face, Colonel Taerin entered the dining room set aside for visiting dignitaries. It was almost always empty. On this particular day, General Fabio sat alone. He looked up and smiled as the colonel entered the room.

"There are plenty of seats in here," greeted the general.

"So you are aware of the marauding hordes running around the palace?" chuckled the colonel as he sat down at the table.

"One could hardly be unaware. There was a line outside the officers' mess when I came by. It looks as if the storm woke the entire palace."

The colonel ordered a light meal when the servant came for his order. He was tempted to engage the general in friendly conversation, but his mind was already reflecting on the events of the prior night. He ate in silence as he planned his day. When he finished his meal, he looked up and was surprised to see that the general had already left the room. He pushed the plate away and rose to his feet.

Colonel Taerin's first stop was with the duty watch. He inquired about the patrols of the previous night and asked if the intruders had been captured. He learned that the grounds had been thoroughly searched, but no intruders had been found. He frowned as he nodded to the officer. As he made his way to the archives, he wondered if that meant that the Badgers had a secret way onto the grounds of the palace, or more ominously, did they already reside on the palace grounds? He halted in the corridor as a shiver raced up his spine. It was quite possible that some of the soldiers posted to protect the

Imperial Palace could actually lead double lives. Could the Badgers have men on the palace staff?

The colonel shook off the ill feeling and entered the repository of official documents. Colonel Donil had said something the night before that stuck in Colonel Taerin's mind. He stated that General Forshire was not under the control of Grand General Kyrga. Taerin found that hard to believe, but he intended to check on it anyway. Colonel Taerin was one of the few people who had access to the emperor's archives, and he was let into the special room without question. He started going through the stacks of proclamations and suddenly halted, a mask of confusion staining his face. He turned around and exited the room and faced the guard outside.

"The emperor's papers are not up-to-date," declared the colonel. "Where are the newest proclamations?"

"There are no other proclamations," answered the guard. "Everything pertaining to the emperor is in that room."

"Who is now responsible for bringing the emperor's papers down here?"

"You are, sir."

Colonel Taerin looked stunned. The task had been his for years, but he thought it had ended when the emperor's guard had been changed. Evidently, it had not ended. He flushed with embarrassment as the guard stared at him.

"Then I have been derelict in my duty," Colonel Taerin stated. "I shall rectify that immediately."

The guard tried to hide his smirk, but the colonel cared little for the guard's opinion. He strode out of the archives and headed for the emperor's office. The emperor's guards knew Taerin well, and they knocked on the door as he approached. One of them cracked the door open and stuck his head inside. He immediately opened the door to admit the colonel. Colonel Taerin entered the emperor's office and saw the emperor sitting back in his chair. The colonel bowed respectfully and waited for the emperor to speak.

"What is it, Colonel?"

"I have come to collect the papers for the archives," the colonel announced as his eyes moved to a rather large stack of papers on one of the shelves behind the desk.

"What? Oh, yes," the emperor said as he turned and saw what the colonel was staring at. "Let me add one more to the pile before you take it."

The emperor leaned forward and slid a paper from the corner of the desk to bring it closer to him. He picked up a writing utensil with his left hand and brought it towards the paper. With a low grumble under his breath, the emperor quickly reached over with his right

hand and seized the pen. He scrawled his signature on the paper and shoved it towards the colonel.

"There is no need to announce that one," stated the emperor. "It has already been carried out. Just file it with the rest."

Colonel Taerin nodded and picked up the proclamation and carried it to the shelf. He placed it on top of the stack and then picked up the entire stack and retreated to the doorway. He bowed once again and then tapped the door with his foot. The guard immediately opened the door to allow the colonel to leave. Colonel Taerin carried the papers straight to the archives and entered the special room. He pulled up a chair, placed the stack of papers on the table and then proceeded to read each and every one of the proclamations before filing them away in their proper place. The task consumed hours of the colonel's time, but he found the reading enlightening. What he found most curious was that the proclamations ran back to the days leading up to the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the Federation, which had occurred months ago. During that entire time, no one had bothered to do anything with the proclamations except pile them up on the shelves in the emperor's office. The colonel was amazed until he realized that Grand General Kyrga probably had no idea how the emperor's office was truly run. After all, Colonel Taerin had been handling that before Kyrga became the Grand General.

When Colonel Taerin got near the bottom of the pile, he found the most interesting papers. One of them proclaimed General Forshire as the Imperial General, a new position on par with the Grand General, who reported directly to the emperor. The colonel noted the date of the proclamation and realized that it was the very day that the emperor's original guards were returned to duty. The colonel finished reading and filing the stack of documents . When he finally emerged from the archives, he was surprised to see that the storm had passed and the sun was setting. He grabbed a meal in the same dining hall that he had used for the morning meal and then headed outdoors to check on Colonel Donil. The first place he checked was the bench near the waterfront, but Donil was not there. He headed straight for the old barracks and opened the door without knocking. He saw the colonel sitting on his usual bunk as if he had been waiting for a visitor.

"I see you are still alive," quipped Colonel Taerin as he entered the building and strode towards the colonel. "I am pleased."

"Wait outside, Donil," came a steely voice from behind Colonel Taerin. "Keep guard and let me know if anyone comes within sight."

Colonel Taerin did not need to turn around to know who the voice belonged to, but he did so anyway. General Forshire stood in the shadows, sword in hand. Colonel Donil gave Colonel Taerin a wide berth as he moved past. When Donil exited the building, he closed the

door.

"I guess you weren't in Olansk after all," Colonel Taerin said with surprise evident in his voice. "I should have known better."

"If you know so much about my travels, why did you bother to send that urgent message? Did you expect me to respond sometime in the spring?"

"Actually," frowned the colonel, "I expected a return message that would prove Donil's ability to communicate with you. I then planned to use that communication link to discuss certain things with you, but it is far better that you are here in person." The colonel's eyes dropped to the long, two-handed sword that the general held in one hand. "Is that really necessary for a simple conversation?"

"Ordinarily, I would say yes," smiled Clint as he sheathed his sword, "but you would be a fool to do anything towards me that might require me to use it."

"And why is that?" asked the colonel.

"Let's skip the small talk, Colonel. What is so important that you needed an urgent meeting with me?"

"I take it that Colonel Donil brought you up-to-date on what happened here last night?" Clint nodded and the colonel continued. "The Badgers think that you have absconded with some women. I seriously doubt that they would risk entering the grounds of the Imperial Palace unless they were fairly sure of their information. I want to know who those women are and where you are keeping them."

"Perhaps you should join the Badgers then," taunted the general. "You seem to have the same questions as they do."

Colonel Taerin sighed in frustration. He sat down on one of the bunks and stared at the general. He was unsure how to get the information that he was certain the general had.

"This is a serious matter, General," the colonel said. "I have reason to believe that the women may be members of the emperor's family. If that is true, I demand to know where they are."

"Do you think the emperor's family has the only women worth kidnapping in all of Zara?" the general asked with a slight smile. "What makes you think that these women that the Badgers are searching for have anything to do with the emperor? Colonel Donil did not report such a conversation, and I am positive that his recounting is accurate."

"I heard the conversation," scowled the colonel. "The difference between Donil and me is that I know who Colonel Jurgon is, or was."

"And how do you know of Colonel Jurgon?"

"I manage the official archives for the emperor," stated the colonel. "I am privy to most everything that goes on in the Imperial

Palace. And yes, I even know about your appointment as the first Imperial General. Let us stop playing games. Tell me what I need to know."

"The less you know the better," replied the general. "The first thing that I would like to point out to you is that Colonel Jurgon would not be mentioned in the archives of the emperor's papers. I do not take Jaar for a fool and neither should you. The real question to be answered here is how you learned of Colonel Jurgon, so let me ask it. How exactly do you know the name of the colonel in question?"

"That is no concern of yours, General. You have information that is vital to the Federation. I suggest that you tell me what I need to know, or I will be forced to compel you to answer."

General Forshire chuckled. "You have pluck, my young friend. I'll give you that. What shall we do about this impasse? Should we both go before Emperor Jaar and ask him to settle this dispute?"

"No," Colonel Taerin said much too quickly.

Clint raised an eyebrow at the response. "Why not? Is the emperor not quite feeling himself today?"

The colonel's eyes widened in alarm. He was not sure if the general's words were meant literally or not. He did not know how to answer, but he needed desperately to know what had happened to the women.

"Tell me what happened to the women," the colonel pleaded.

Clint sighed and nodded sympathetically. "The estate was attacked by Badgers. We counted one-hundred bodies, none of them female. Do you remember the day we sat on the bench and I showed you the golden badger pin?"

Colonel Taerin nodded. "I accused you of stealing it from the emperor's office."

"I found the pin on the body of a headless colonel."

"Colonel Jurgon." Taerin nodded in understanding. "How is it that you even knew where the emperor's secret estate was located?"

"The emperor gave me instructions," answered Clint. "You thought that the emperor was acting strangely during the festival. You were correct. Grand General Kyrga was holding him captive. Colonel Jurgon's head was delivered to him to ensure his cooperation."

"Why you?" frowned the colonel.

"The emperor could not trust anyone else. He had no idea who was aligned with the Grand General. I was not only an outsider, but I had already completed a sensitive investigation against the Grand General. His choice was logical."

"I can see that," the colonel replied with disappointment evident in his voice. "If the Badgers stole the women, then why are they now looking for them?"

“Because the A Corps ambushed them and liberated the women.”

“You attacked the Badgers?” gasped Colonel Taerin. “I would have thought that they would have guarded the emperor’s family better than that.”

“Oh, they did guard them well,” retorted General Forshire. “They had one-hundred Badgers guarding the women, but they made a foolish mistake. They split into two groups. That is when the A Corps struck.”

“I am confused,” admitted the colonel. “The A Corps is supposed to be in Olansk. The estate was surely within the Empire of Barouk. Your telling makes no sense.”

“I have kept a small detachment of A Corps to the west of the city,” explained the general. “We attacked fifty of the Badgers with one-hundred-fifty men. Our losses were minimal, but that did not last long. The other half of the Badgers caught us asleep and extracted their revenge. Only two of us survived along with the women.”

“Do you have the women now?”

“They are safe.” The general nodded. “But do not ask where they are. I am not prepared to answer that question at this time. Right now, I need to determine what is going on in the emperor’s life. What can you tell me about his relationship with Grand General Kyrga?”

“What game are you playing, General?” frowned the colonel. “You know enough from our talks that the key to dethroning an emperor is through his family, and you now claim to hold those women captive. I cannot discuss the emperor with someone who might be trying to overthrow the empire. You could be in league with the plotters.”

The general sighed and walked to the fireplace. He grabbed a handful of ashes and returned to the center of the building. He sat on the bunk opposite the colonel and threw the ashes onto the floor.

“What are you doing?” questioned the colonel.

“We both need answers, Taerin, but we are both afraid of the responses we might receive from the other. I intend to show you that I mean you no harm. Take off your uniform.”

“I will not,” frowned the colonel. “Have you gone mad?”

“Perhaps,” smiled Clint as he bent forward and poked the pile of ashes with his finger.

His finger moved swiftly through the ashes and he leaned back and stared at the colonel’s face. The expression of shock and fear was as clear as the moon on a cloudless night.

“You know, Taerin, you have your mother’s eyes.”

The colonel was speechless. The most closely guarded secret in the entire Federation was laid out on the floor for all to see. The colonel moved his foot to the ashes and scattered them.

“Your mother and sisters are perfectly safe,” declared the general. “Your father I am not too sure about. That is why I need answers from you.”

“Why would you care about him? Is it to help him or overthrow him?”

“I have an agreement with him,” answered the general. “I need to know if he will still honor it.”

“What is the agreement?” asked Colonel Taerin.

“This is not how the game is supposed to be played,” frowned the general. “We are both supposed to be open and honest with one another, but you have not volunteered anything yet. Do you consider me a threat?”

“I do,” admitted the colonel. “There has always been something mysterious about you, and I do not like unsolved mysteries. Now you claim to hold some rather high cards and are raising the stakes. Do you truly expect me to show you my hand?”

“I am showing you mine,” countered the general.

“Not all of it.” The colonel shook his head vigorously. “You are becoming more mysterious by the moment. How could you possibly know that mark?”

“I saw your father’s mark the night he proclaimed me the Imperial General.”

“With your sword at his throat, no doubt,” spat the colonel.

“Actually,” replied General Forshire, “my sword was stuck in the chest of a demonic priest who had just stolen your father’s memories. That demonkin had just learned your identity when I killed him. Your father and I are not friends, but we do have an agreement that satisfies both of our concerns. I merely need to be sure that nothing has changed since I left Despair. Will the emperor honor our agreement?”

“You keep referring to this agreement,” scowled the colonel. “Why don’t you just go and ask him?”

“Because I don’t particularly want to die this night,” answered the general. “The morning after he proclaimed my new title, the emperor appeared outside the palace. He talked to me and Donil as we were leaving the palace. That struck me as odd because we had been meeting in secret. It was not in the best interests of either of us to be seen together. That causes me to doubt that the emperor was acting of his own free will.”

“I cannot answer that question without knowing what the agreement is.”

Clint sat and thought for a moment. Eventually, he nodded. “The A Corps is returning to Despair to seize the Imperial Palace and free your father from Grand General Kyrga and whoever is controlling

him."

"And in return?"

"There will be no war with Alcea."

"Are you Alcean?" gasped the colonel.

Clint sighed with frustration. "You are interrogating me, Colonel. Oh, you are doing it well and in an excellent manner, but this will not continue. This conversation will be a two-way conversation, or it will end this very moment."

"You are being unfair, General. You know everything that is going on, and I truly know nothing. Think for a minute what you are asking of me. What if I were to say yes, but I was wrong? You would take your wrath out on me and my family. And if I said no, you would consider the agreement broken and take your wrath out on me and my family. What do you expect me to say?"

"I will never harm the women of your family," promised Clint, "no matter what happens. I risked my life to save them, and I hold them harmless. If your father cheats on the agreement, I will kill him. As for you, our future relations depend on what kind of man you are. If you are honorable and reasonable as your grandfather was, we will get along fine. If you seek to continue your father's policies of plundering the poor and enslaving them, we will come to blows. I cannot be more open and honest than that. I will never hold a person accountable for the deeds of another."

"You still leave me in a quandary," frowned the colonel, "but I accept your words in the spirit that they were given. I do not agree with my father's policies. I never have. In fact, we have had numerous disagreements about them. I spoke to you on more than one occasion about the apparent snubbing of me by the emperor. I suspected that most of that was due to the disagreements we had, but now I am not so sure. Since the date of your proclamation, the emperor has been free to move about as he pleases. He has his own guards back and he once again dictates orders to Grand General Kyrga. One would think that the emperor is his old self once again."

"But you don't?"

"The quandary, General, is that I want my old father back. I do not want him dead."

"And you think that as soon as you tell me that he won't honor the agreement, that will mark him for death." Clint nodded with understanding. "I am sorry, Taerin, but if your father breaks the agreement, he will die. If we don't find out who is pulling Kyrga's strings, your father will die anyway, but there is more to consider than just your father. The war with Alcea is going to be costly for the Federation. Perhaps you should be more concerned with the deaths of hundreds of thousands instead of just your father. I know that is a

hard thing to ask of any son, but you are not just any son. You are the future Emperor of Barouk. Will you start your reign trying to make the world a better place to live, or will you start it by listening to thousands of women and children wailing for their lost loved ones?"

Colonel Taerin sat silently for a long time. Finally, he looked the general in the eye and nodded. "I think the emperor is under some kind of magical spell. Unless we can find a way to break that spell, he will not honor the agreement."

"Why do you think he is under a spell?"

"There are a number of reasons, most of them small, but together they add up. The most significant is that the emperor truly has no idea who I am. I am convinced of that now."

"The emperor has learned to control his emotions very well," retorted Clint. "Perhaps he is afraid to let anyone know that he is close to you for fear that they might suspect the truth."

"Father has done that well for years." The colonel shook his head dismissively. "Sometimes he would publicly treat me like dirt to keep everyone at bay, but this is different. There is no spark of recognition in his eyes when we meet, even in private. Whatever the black-cloaks have done to him, he does not recognize me. I suspect that they just found a more efficient means of controlling him."

"What other clues do you have?"

"He tries to write left-handed and eventually switches to his right hand in frustration. I have seen this many times since you left the palace. My father has always been right-handed, but his mind seems to think that he is left-handed. Also, my father was always an early riser, but now he seldom gets out of bed before the sun is well into the sky. Were it not for my father's familiar face, I would swear that it was not my father based upon these small things alone."

"Perhaps it is not your father at all," mused the Ranger.

"What do you mean? How could it not be my father?"

"I would have to talk to a mage that I know, but I remember hearing about a spell that allows a magician to assume the body of another. If that is what has happened here, your father is already dead."

Colonel Taerin sighed deeply and closed his eyes for a moment. He had suspected for some time that the relationship he once had with his father was long over, and he felt fairly confident that it would never return. While somewhat shocking, hearing that his father might already be dead began to make sense.

"That would explain the late rising and the propensity to use his left hand," frowned the colonel. "I pray that you are wrong, but I will proceed as if you are right. Where is my family?"

"They are safe," Clint answered vaguely. "Believe me when I say

that they have a better chance of remaining safe if you do not know where they are. That is not a threat on my part. It is an overabundance of caution."

Colonel Taerin nodded with acceptance. He didn't like not knowing, but the general had been honest with him so far. "Are you Alcean? Is that why you are willing to risk your life to end this war?"

"I am an Alcean Ranger," stated the general. "Your father was aware of that when he signed the proclamation."

"Do you think he meant to honor the deal?"

"I do. I consider myself to be a fair judge of men, and I believe that he was sincere when we made the agreement. His true fury was reserved for the unknown man who is trying to murder his family and steal his throne. Alcea certainly meant less to him than revenge. Yes, I believe he meant to honor the deal. I suspect that something happened that night after I left his quarters. Perhaps Kyrga was alarmed when K'san did not return."

"Well, Alcean Ranger, I will make you a deal. If you find this unknown man and prove to me that he is behind this affair, I will see to it that there is no war with Alcea."

"That is a deal that I would heartily accept, my friend, but I fear we may be too late. Spring is just around the corner, and Grand General Kyrga will be dispatching his troops any day now. I will have my people do whatever they can to ferret out the puppet master, but I think war is coming. What can you tell me about increases in troop strength since the festival days?"

"Kyrga is continuing to build the army, and his pace is rather frantic. I do not understand it. We already have over three-hundred-fifty-thousand soldiers, yet he shows no signs of slowing down. He is offering ever higher bounties to get more men."

"What is he doing with them?"

Colonel Taerin hesitated. "It is one thing to work together for peace," he said with a frown, "but you are now asking me to betray my country. I cannot do that."

"It is not your country any more, Taerin," Clint said sadly. "Someone is driving this coming conflict, but it is not the rightful emperor. If it is any consolation to you, Alcea plans to spare as many of your people as we can afford to. The more knowledge we have of their disposition, the easier we can accomplish that."

"You are in no position to spare Federation soldiers," retorted Colonel Taerin. "While I am not privy to the invasion plans, I have heard the odds involved in the coming war. Alcea will be utterly destroyed, and for that I am truly sorry."

"I will say to you what I said to your father," General Forshire declared with a thin smile. "There are only a handful of Alceans in

Zara, but we have freed the elves, destroyed your fleet and your shipyards, gained access to the highest levels of your Federation, and destroyed a large faction of the infamous Badgers. Think about that before you write Alcea off. Think about it and then realize that there are thousands more like us in Alcea waiting for your soldiers to arrive."

Colonel Taerin swallowed hard as he thought about the Alcean's words. "The bloodshed will be great for both of our nations. Let us pray that we can work together to stop this war before it starts."

Chapter 6

Water Water

The bitter wind howled out of the south, driving the sea into a frenzy of towering waves. The ship creaked and groaned as it bobbed from crest to trough and back to crest again. Every time the Resurgence rose out of a trough, the masts shuddered and the lines snapped taut as the battering winds assaulted the ship anew. Every trough brought thousands of gallons of seawater across the deck as the wind whipped the crests of the huge waves and sent a torrent of seawater cascading down upon the ship. The captain fought the tiller constantly, trying to maintain some sense of direction and keep the ship from capsizing, but his hopes for survival were not high. The weight of his cargo was so immense that the ship had practically no freeboard, and he knew that a single wave breeching the rail could send the ship to the bottom of the sea.

"Can't your people do anything?" Captain Imatin shouted to the black-cloak leader. "This ship is going to sink like a rock."

Seiko's eyes scanned the deck of the huge ship. Of the one-hundred black-cloaks under his command, eighty of them were already on deck using their magic to keep the ship afloat. Twenty of them were dedicated to keeping the sails full while the Resurgence was in a trough. If they did not, the masts would snap like twigs as the fury of the storm hit when they rose to the crest. Sixty of the mages were magically gathering the seawater from the decks and bilge and returning it to the sea. The water was coming aboard at such a voluminous rate that any less than sixty mages and the Resurgence would slip below the surface. That still left twenty black-cloaks, but Seiko believed strongly in a reserve. He could not afford to exhaust all of the black-cloaks at the same time. To do so would mean certain death.

"Remain steadfast, Captain," ordered Seiko. "We will weather this storm."

The black-cloak leader spoke with an air of confidence, but he was worried. The shipbuilders had underestimated the weight of Alutar, and the Resurgence rode perilously low in the water, even in calm seas. In a torrent such as this massive winter storm it truly took magic to keep the ship afloat. The question on Seiko's mind was whether one-hundred black-cloaks was enough magic to see the journey through to its final destination.

“Do you have any idea where we are?” Seiko shouted to the captain.

“None,” spat the captain. “We haven’t seen the sky in days, but I can tell you this. When this storm ends, we will not be anywhere that we want to be.”

Seiko glared at the captain. “When this storm ends, Captain, we will be alive. That is all that matters for now.”

* * * *

The three Knights of Alcea rode into the slums of Farmin and dismounted near the building housing the impromptu infirmary. They avoided the front of building where many ornate carriages blocked the narrow street and walked their mounts around to the rear of the building. They opened the door and entered a large room with numerous beds scattered about. Most of the beds were empty and Garth Shado raised an eyebrow in surprise.

“The friends of Fakir have returned,” greeted Zynor, his eyes twinkling in a friendly manner. “Forgive me if I don’t remember your names. Fakir is in his office.”

“Names are not important,” smiled Garth. “Where are all your patients?”

“They stand out front for potions,” frowned Zynor as he scratched his bald dome. The long, thin wisps of white hair fringing his dome swayed as Zynor’s mouth opened as if he had more to say.

“I meant the indigent patients,” Garth replied. “Are the slums free of disease?”

“Pretty much,” interjected Atule. “Now we bilk the rich with tonics and elixirs.”

“And you would rather not?” asked Natia.

Atule sighed. “The rich are worthy of healing as well as the poor, but I worry about Kalmar. I fear that the lure of gold might once again grab his notice.”

“You worry too much,” stated Eulena as the elven mage passed into the room through a curtained passageway.

“Kalmar is not afflicted by greed,” declared Zynor, “and he is not ever likely to be again, at least not for his personal use. He is building a treasury to help the poor. Worry not for him.”

“Most of the gold is going towards food,” offered Valera as she carried a large box of breads past the Knights of Alcea. “These people were emaciated when we arrived. They still require a healthy supply of food to restore their bodies.”

Tedi and Natia both moved to take the large box from Valera’s hands.

“I need to speak to Fakir,” Garth said to Tedi and Natia. “Why don’t you two see if you can offer any help while we are here?”

Garth passed through the curtain to the showroom where Kalmar sold his goods. There was a line of well-dressed people waiting to speak to the healer, and Kalmar did not even notice the Knight of Alcea behind him. Without a word, Garth turned and entered the office where Fakir Aziz sat staring blankly at a wall. Without looking to see who had just entered, the Mage waved his visitor to a chair before the desk. He shook his head as if to clear it and then locked eyes with Garth as the Knight of Alcea sat down.

"You are becoming a regular visitor," smiled Fakir Aziz. "Have you come for more local folklore?"

"Not this time," smiled Garth. "Fakir Aziz has already given me what I needed."

"And I have not?" frowned the Mage.

"You have given me much more than I ever wanted," Garth replied cryptically. "Still, I need your help. There is a water witch named Haditha. If she still lives, I need to communicate with her."

"If she still lives?"

"Haditha and Captain Gomery went on a mission to the Needle some time ago. They never returned."

"Yet you still hold out hope for their safety?"

"Haditha is afraid of Captain Gomery becoming too involved with what is going on. It is plausible that they survived the mission and are hiding in order to avoid the coming conflict. She fears for his safety."

The Mage nodded knowingly. "Her fear is not without reason. These are dangerous times that we live in."

"Aren't all times dangerous?" Garth sighed with weariness. "There is always some conflict that threatens us all. There are times that I curse you for the elixir you gave me, but…"

"But you could no more hide on your island paradise and ignore the ills of the world than Jenneva could. I understand. What is the message you wish the water witch to receive?"

"Their help is needed," answered Garth. "They are to return to the Isle of Despair as soon as possible."

"That is it?" asked the Mage. "Will they understand? Or will you be there to explain it to them?"

"I am on my way to Tagaret for a final meeting before the war, but there are others on the island who can explain the situation to them. Will you do it?"

Fakir Aziz smiled. "You did not ask if I could do it."

"No, I didn't," Garth smiled broadly. "I have learned not to underestimate you."

"What you mean is that I am your last chance to contact them," laughed the Mage. "Very well, I will try to contact Haditha, but there are no guarantees."

“I understand.” Garth nodded in acceptance. “I should also warn you that you and your people are in a precarious place. War is coming soon, and the cities of the Federation will not be safe places for your group. As there appear to be few of the poor left unhealed in Farmin, perhaps you should be thinking of moving on.”

“Unless Farmin is where we need to be,” the Mage responded.

“Unless Farmin is where you need to be.” Garth rose and bowed his head respectfully. Without another word, the Knight of Alcea left the room.

Fakir Aziz continued to sit, staring blankly at the wall. After some time, he rose to his feet and walked out of the office. He passed through the curtain to the back room and left the building through the rear door. He paused thoughtfully in the alley and gazed skyward. The day was ending as the last rays of sunshine fled from the sky. The Mage walked through the alleys of the slums and then through the wider streets of the city, slowly making his way towards one of the long ramps that led from the city down to the waterfront far below the bluffs. When he finally reached the shoreline, the area was quiet. The fishermen had long ago retired to their homes, and the cargo ships that were planning to leave the city had already set sail.

The Mage slipped off his boots and waded into the water. He squatted and submerged his hands as the gentle waves lapped over his feet. Closing his eyes, he sent a message forth into the Sea of Tears. It was not a message of words, but rather one of feelings. The message carried a sense of anxiety and urgency, but the communication would not affect any but the higher life forms of the sea. With the message sent, the Mage remained unmoving, feeling the essence of the underwater world. He smiled contently as all within the Sea of Tears felt right. The smile soon faded as he felt far beyond the Needle. His eyes quickly opened, and he stared into the darkness as if he could actually see what was transpiring half a world away. The Mage’s brow creased with concern as he rose and returned to the shore. He dried his hands and feet on his hem and donned his boots.

By the time he returned to the infirmary in the slums of Farmin, the lines of wealthy patrons had disappeared, and the mages were getting ready for the evening meal and then bed. Fakir Aziz sat at the table with the six other mages. Crystil filled a bowl with stew and placed it in front of Fakir Aziz. The Mage looked up at the old hag and smiled. He ate in silence as the other mages discussed the events of the day. When everyone was done with their meal, he stood to get their attention. He then looked at each of the others before speaking.

“This is our last day in Farmin,” he announced. Several of the mages opened their mouths to object, but the Mage halted it all with a simple raising of his hand. “Our work is never done, but we have no

more time for Farmin." He turned his gaze towards the elven healer. "Eulena, I want you to lead the group northward. You may travel along the Federation Highway, or use the trails through the Dark Forest, whichever you think is safer. Do not call attention to yourselves. Times within the Federation are soon to become more dangerous than they have ever been."

"Where will you be?" asked Atule.

"And where are we going?" asked Kalmar.

"I am needed elsewhere," answered Fakir Aziz. "I will rejoin you soon. As for our destination, we will head towards Giza. That is all I can say at the moment."

The Mage turned and left the room. Kalmar immediately rose and returned with four fat pouches of gold. He upended the pouches on the table, spilling gold coins out in front of him. Atule raised an eyebrow as he watched the young mage from Korocca count the coins and separate them into two piles.

"That is a fair return on my diamond," stated Atule. "What will you do with it?"

Kalmar took the smaller pile of coins and placed them into one of the pouches. He tied the pouch closed and slid it across the table to Atule.

"That is a small return on your diamond," stated Kalmar, "but it is enough to get us started in Giza should we make it that far. I would like you to hold onto it."

Atule tied the pouch to his belt, but he still watched Kalmar closely as the young Koroccan put the rest of the coins into the other three pouches. When Kalmar tied those three pouches to his own belt, Atule's eyebrow rose again.

"That is hardly a fair split of our efforts," Atule remarked.

Kalmar rose and looked at the mage from the jungle. "I am going to find Bacar and give him the gold."

"You are going to give gold to a thief?" quipped Atule.

Kalmar merely smiled and left the building, but Zynor answered the question. "Bacar is no more a thief than we are. He takes money from the rich to aid the poor. So do we. The only difference is that we give the rich potions to make them feel better about parting with their gold."

"Bacar is as fine a man as you will ever be," taunted Crystil. "At least he is honest about his shortcomings."

Atule sighed deeply and shook his head. He rose from the table and disappeared through the curtain.

* * * *

The Cliffs of Ranool rose over one-thousand feet from the surface of the sea to form the southern side of the Needle. The face of the

cliffs was stark, but there were a few caves, although the sheer rise of the face made those caves inaccessible to all but flying creatures. There was, however, one cave unseen by the ships moving through the narrow straight. It had no visible entrance because its opening was well below sea level. The inside of the cave was roomy, and it had several small tunnels that provided light and air while keeping prying eyes away. At night, even a fire was acceptable as the winds flowing through the Needle would quickly disperse the smoke and avoid giving away the hiding place.

Captain Gomery sat idly in the cave, staring at the large pool of water in the center of the chamber. His love for Haditha had kept him content over the months they had hidden in the cave, but he found himself thinking about the Alceans more and more with each passing day. He wondered if any of them were still alive, and what they might be doing. He wondered if the war between the two continents had started yet. Or was it already over? It was not as if he was growing tired of being with the water witch. He still loved her deeply, but his uneasiness grew stronger with each change in the tides. He did not know what to make of it.

A loud slap snatched the captain from his thoughts. He looked down to see a large fish sliding across the rock towards his feet. He stopped its progress with his foot and then let his eyes return to the pool. Haditha, in her mermaid form, stared back at him.

“Where were you?” she asked softly as she pulled herself out of the pool of water.

“What do you mean?” asked the captain, confusion evident in his voice. “I haven’t gone anywhere. I cannot.”

“But you can,” Haditha sighed as she changed her form into the old woman from the Endless Swamp. “You travel in your mind, and I know that you were somewhere else when I returned. You did not even notice me when I surfaced.”

“I am sorry,” apologized Captain Gomery. “I can’t stop thinking of the others. It gets worse every day.”

“I understand.”

Captain Gomery raised an eyebrow in surprise. He was sure that Haditha would immediately take his words in the worst possible way, as if his love for her was no longer strong.

“I suppose it is a failing of humans to require contact with one another,” he offered sheepishly. “I still love you dearly.”

“I know,” Haditha smiled tautly. “You have proven that beyond question. I have spent so many years in isolation that I forget how it felt in the beginning. I am wrong to subject you to this.”

“It is not wrong for us to desire to be with each other,” countered the captain.

“No,” agreed the water witch, “but it is selfish. The others need our help.”

“We do not even know if any of them are still alive,” frowned the captain. “How can you say that they need our help?”

“The feelings of anxiety are not yours alone,” admitted Haditha. “We are being summoned to the Isle of Despair.”

The captain frowned in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t either,” the water witch replied candidly, “but I know it to be true. A force more powerful than anything I have ever known is causing our anxieties. I have found myself wondering about the Alceans and how they are doing. That is not natural for someone like me. It is clearly a command to return to your people.” The water witch nodded towards the fish she had thrown towards the captain. “We will have a fine meal this evening and then depart for the Isle of Despair.”

* * * *

The dwarven mages of Tarashin were a varied lot. Some were male, and some were female. Some were old, while others were young. They came in all shapes and sizes, but they had one thing in common. All of them were well versed in the magics of strengthening metal and cutting into rock. Metal and stone were the mainstay of dwarven life, and dwarven magicians seemed to have an innate ability to perform such magics. A few had taken their mastery of the arts far beyond those rudimentary offerings, and they had often tried to interest the others into expanding their knowledge. The result of those efforts had been the creation of the Magicians’ Guild. The guild met once a month, and magicians took turns teaching new spells.

Dorforun was the current leader of the guild, and a frequent lecturer. He was extremely tall and lanky for a dwarf, which had precluded him from working in some of the more enclosed spaces during his earlier years. As a result, he had spent more time studying old magical scrolls than most of his kinsmen. Over the years he had amassed an amazing knowledge of magic, and he was eager to share it with the others.

On this particular day, Dorforun was speaking before the guild about a spell that could create flexible watertight seals. While the process of creating the seals was complex, manipulation of the seals after their creation was amazingly quick and simple.

“As you can see,” summarized Dorforun, “the seals can be quickly expanded or contracted. Other than our little display basin here, can anyone think of uses for these seals?”

“The obvious use is for sealing doors where water might intrude,” stated one of the dwarves.

“That is obvious,” snorted another magician, “but there are other

potential uses. The generous amount of expansion and contraction suggests another use to me. If these seals are strong enough, they could be contracted and fitted into a crevice in the rock. They could then be magically expanded, forcing the crevice to widen."

"Excellent," smiled Dorforun. "The seals would indeed be strong enough, as long as the mage who created them made them strong enough. That is a variable in the creation that must be taken into account to match the use of the seals to their task."

"Then we should also have a rating system for these new seals," suggested one of the guild members. "We wouldn't want to inadvertently use a weak seal for a task that requires a strong one."

"Correct," nodded Dorforun.

Dorforun was pleased with how the lecture had gone. He stood listening to the discussion of various uses for the seals and how the rating system should be devised and implemented. He purposely left the discussion to the others and did not try to steer it or manage it any way. He knew that some of the dwarves considered him to be too intellectual and not active enough in the actual day-to-day operation of the mine, and he didn't want to appear as a schoolmaster. After a while, Dorforun quietly exited the chamber where the guild met. He strolled aimlessly through the finely hewn corridors of Tarashin to give the guild members time to develop their own thoughts. He had planned to return after an hour to see how the discussion was developing, but that was not to be.

Dorforun halted suddenly. He had meandered into one of the oldest sections of Tarashin. The corridor had been created in the days of King Arak, but the dwarves of Tarashin had moved on to richer areas where the veins flowed with precious metals. The dwarven magician warily glanced around, wondering what had caused the sudden feeling of unease. Uncharacteristically, the dwarven mage called forth a protective shield to envelop himself.

"That is hardly necessary," smiled Fakir Aziz as he stepped out of the darkness. "I am not here to harm you."

Dorforun stared at the human with a mixture of suspicion and unease. "Then why are you here? And how did you get here? You certainly did not walk past the guards."

"The how is not important," smiled the Mage. "As for why, I think you already know. Your services are required."

Dorforun blinked. He was positive that he had never laid eyes on the human before, yet he suddenly felt as if he knew him. Were he younger and less experienced, he would have suspected the human of casting a spell upon him, but the feeling was not caused by magic. Dorforun was sure of that. A feeling of awe swept through the dwarf's body, and suddenly he understood.

“Why me?”

“You are more powerful than even you know,” Fakir said with a smile. “Dress in a long cloak with a hood. You will be going into the land of humans, and they must not see a dwarf.”

“How long will I be gone?” asked Dorforun. “I will want to tell the others when to expect my return.”

“You will tell no one,” instructed the Mage. “As for the duration of your commitment, I can give no answer. Perhaps you will never return.”

The dwarf swallowed hard as the Mage’s words struck home. The human had not explicitly said that death awaited him, but it was clear that the possibility was more than minimal.

“Everyone will know that I have left,” countered the dwarf. “Even if I don’t say farewell, the guards will report my leaving.”

“The guards will not know of your departure,” declared the Mage. “No one is to know. I will wait for you in the valley south of Tarashin. Do not be long.”

Chapter 7

Thirteen Days

Alex, Tedi, and Natia passed through the Door and entered the Royal Palace in Tagaret. Alex spoke briefly to the guards stationed there and then the Knights of Alcea made their way to King Arik's study. They entered the study to find the king and queen talking to Theos, the Tyronian mage. The conversation immediately halted as the royal couple turned to greet the newly arrived Knights of Alcea.

"I was hoping that you would show up," welcomed King Arik. "The meeting started some time ago, and I wanted to hear from you before attending myself."

"I had some things that needed to be taken care of," apologized Alex. "Has Jenneva arrived yet?"

"No," frowned Queen Tanya. "The fairies assured me that she has been notified."

"Time is getting scarce for all of us," mused Alex. "I suspect that we are all running a little tight on time right now. It is not going to get any better. There are more coming from Zara. I took the liberty of asking the guards to have the others report directly here instead of going straight to the meeting." The Knight of Alcea nodded to Theos, and the mage nodded in return. "Has Theos been introduced to everyone yet?"

"Not yet," answered King Arik. "I was planning on doing that at the meeting."

"Do not introduce him as Tyronian," suggested Alex. "It is not that I expect any of the group to betray a confidence, but it would be better if no one slipped and called him the Tyronian mage."

"Good point," nodded the king.

The door opened and Zack Nolan, Wylan and Sheri entered the room. Directly following them was Jenneva and Clint McFarren. The Ranger was still dressed in his Federation uniform."

The Tyronian's eyes widened nervously.

"That is sure to get some attention at the meeting," quipped the queen. "How did you get past the guards?"

"I had to vouch for him," chuckled Jenneva.

"Even though they knew who I was," complained Clint.

"I am surprised that you found time to leave Zara," commented King Arik. "I thought you were hurrying your army to Despair to free the emperor?"

“Plans have changed,” frowned the Ranger as he turned and faced Jenneva. “I think a mage has taken over the emperor’s body. I need to know how I can verify that.”

“Tell me why you suspect such a thing,” replied Jenneva.

Clint detailed his conversation with Colonel Taerin and added in his suspicions based upon the emperor’s behavior. Jenneva nodded increasingly as he spoke.

“It sounds very much like Reflecting Pool,” stated Jenneva, “but it could be some variation of it that we are ignorant of. If it is Reflecting Pool, getting the emperor to cast a spell will break the illusion, but it must be done at an appropriate time. Once the illusion is broken, there is nothing to stop the mage from reconstituting it. If you wish to reveal him to someone, make sure that person is present before you force the mage to cast a spell.”

“Like the emperor’s son,” stated Zack.

“That will not be necessary,” smiled Clint. “I have made contact with the heir of the Empire of Barouk, but now is not the time to discuss that. There is more important news. Grand General Kyrga has ordered the movement of troops. The 9th Corps of Barouk and the 25th Corps of Aerta are already on the move. They have received orders to report to Camp Destiny. The war is starting soon.”

“How soon?” asked the king.

“About two weeks,” replied the Ranger. “It depends on where General Kolling and General Gertz have stationed their troops, so I can not be positive of the timing, but the fairies will surely report their arrival in Camp Destiny.”

“We cannot wait for their arrival in Camp Destiny,” the king replied anxiously. “We have our own troop movements to accomplish. Why are they starting so early? Has spring arrived earlier in Zara than here?”

“The northern portion of Zara is having one of the worst winters on record,” answered Alex. “There is no hint of spring there.”

“I agree,” offered Theos. “I have never seen a winter so severe.”

“But that is not true in the south,” retorted Clint. “And it is in the south where their armies are massed and waiting for orders.”

“What about near Camp Destiny?” asked Jenneva. “That is farther north and it is close to the Barrier.”

“I do not know,” answered Clint. “I can check it out when I return to Zara.”

“The fairies can handle that,” interjected Alex. “You have too much on your plate already. Do not spread yourself too thin. Where is the A Corps now?”

“They were marching on Despair,” frowned the Federation general, “but I stopped that. If Emperor Jaar is not going to honor our

agreement, and he will certainly not if he is dead, there is no reason for my troops to go to Despair. I turned them around and headed them towards Ramaldi Pass to aid in the liberation of Vinafor."

"We should get to the meeting and let the others know that the war is coming sooner than expected."

"There is more," warned Clint. "The Federation has continued to grow their army. It is hard for me to get accurate information as I am not supposed to be in Despair, but the best estimate that I can come up with suggests that they have added another sixty-thousand troops."

"Sixty-thousand?" gasped the king. "Are they coming here?"

"I can't be certain," answered Clint, "but I suspect that they are not. There has been no formal announcement of the new armies, and the new generals seem interested only in training their new troops."

"They are for crowd control," suggested the Alcean spymaster. "Whoever is planning on taking over the Federation is gathering the armies to ensure that he is not foiled in the attempt. If I am correct, expect to see those armies stationed in the major cities of the Federation, especially Despair."

Alex nodded thoughtfully. "That makes sense, Zack. The usurper is planning to seize control while the bulk of the Federation armies are in Alcea. The new armies are to counteract any resistance from the home guard."

"And that is why they needed to replace Jaar," agreed Clint. "It does make sense now. Jaar had gotten out of hand, and they could not afford to attempt a coup with eighty-thousand loyal troops in Despair. Those troops would unerringly follow the heir, but I suspect these new troops will be under the control of Grand General Kyrga. The new generals will owe their allegiance to him alone."

Alex paced wordlessly to the window and stared out at the blustery winter scene. The others turned and stared at his back, wondering what he was thinking about. The king opened his mouth to ask that very question, but the queen stopped him with a slight touch on his arm and a shake of her head. The room stood in silence as Alex pondered the ramification of the new information. Eventually, he sighed heavily and turned to face the others.

"Do not send your troops into Vinafor, Clint," commanded Alex. "They may be needed in eastern Zara."

"What do you mean?" scowled Theos. "The liberation of the western countries was promised. You cannot just walk away and leave those patriots under the heel of the Federation."

Alex looked the Tyronian mage in the eye. There was no reprimand in the gaze, only sympathy. "The western countries must all fall in succession, and they will, but only when success is assured. We are now facing one-hundred-forty-thousand troops when we

expected only eighty-thousand. Even that lower number left us woefully outnumbered. Now we are facing odds that require a reassessment of our strategies."

"If the liberation of the western countries is timed properly," suggested Zack, "some of those new armies would be forced to respond. Perhaps that might be the key."

"Clint?" prompted Alex.

"General Tauman would probably be the first to respond," declared the Federation general. "The 1st Corps is considered to be the finest army in the Federation, and Camp Destiny is close enough to arrive in Vinafor quickly."

"He wouldn't leave Camp Destiny unguarded, would he?" asked Wylan.

"That depends on timing," answered Clint. "As long as he thinks the Doors are still working, no, but if he discovers that he is guarding nothing important, he would eagerly respond to an uprising. He certainly will not keep his army tied down in Camp Destiny if it is worthless there."

"Which also makes him a threat to any action we take in the eastern countries," stated Alex. "Tauman and the 1st Corps have to be neutralized. Can you accomplish that, Clint?"

Clint frowned heavily. "I am proud of what I have made the A Corps into, but they are not Alcean Rangers. 1st Corps outnumbers us five-to-one, and they are far better trained from what I have heard."

"Can you do it?" pressed Alex.

"We will do it," Clint promised, "but I don't know how just yet."

"Station the A Corps close to Camp Destiny," instructed Alex. "I will let you know when all of the Doors have been neutralized."

"You two can work out those details later," interrupted King Arik. "We have a room full of people waiting on us. Let's get that meeting over with so they can all return home and prepare for this war."

The discussion ended and King Arik led the group out of his study and into the meeting room. General Gregor was addressing the group and King Arik nodded for him to continue as the smaller group filed into the room.

"The holding pens need to be dispersed," instructed the general. "It is dangerous for them all to be located in the same place, and it is not wise to have them near the capital cities. The maximum number of prisoners in any one pen is to be one-thousand men, and that should be broken up into smaller segments if possible. Remember, the purpose of these pens is to keep the enemy from regrouping and causing havoc after they are captured, so keep the locations of pens secret. If any one pen is compromised, it will be easier to handle if they cannot help others to escape."

“Transporting large numbers of prisoners will not be easy,” complained Governor Mobami of Sordoa, “especially if we are still engaged with other prongs of the attack.”

“Each prong should have its own cadre of citizen militia for this task,” offered Bin-lu. “That way we do not take valuable resources away from the army. The militia need not be made up of warriors. They only need to be proficient enough with bows to keep the prisoners under guard. The prisoners will already have been relieved of their weapons, so the greatest threat is escape. In Lanoir, we have already created these militia and the holding pens. I can share with you the problems we encountered if you are interested.”

“Mention the transportation problems, Bin-lu,” suggested Colonel Gregor. “If anyone needs to hear more, he can get with you after the meeting.”

The Knight of Alcea nodded. “Transportation will be a major problem because the pens should be located well away from the city. It is safest to move the prisoners in a contained fashion rather than have them march to the pens. In Lanoir we are using wagons and ships. This means that we need to have the wagons and ships available for use without their importance becoming noticed by any spies in the area. Governor Za-chan has accomplished this by requiring every cargo ship in Lanoir to be inspected before the first day of spring. The harbor of Ongchi is already crowded with ships, but the inspections have been delayed for some strange reason, so none of them have left yet.”

Many in the room laughed at the wily methods of the Lanoirian governor.

Bin-lu smiled and continued, “A side effect of this slow inspection process is that the streets of Ongchi are overcrowded with wagons. Most of the wagons arrived in the city with cargoes for the ships, but the ships are not ready to leave because they have not been inspected. So we have the wagons and ships ready for the transportation of prisoners without letting any spies know their true purpose.”

“Clever,” commented General Gregor. “I think that is enough about handling the prisoners. I will turn the meeting over to King Arik.”

“Thank you all for coming,” opened the king. “I have just received news that the Zarans have started to move their armies towards the portals. While we do not have an exact date for the start of the war, it is estimated that we have two weeks before the first Zaran troops arrive. That is a little bit sooner than we had planned on, but the timing is not under our control. General Fernandez, I think this affects Cordonia far greater than the others. You need to start moving the Cordonian army to Targa immediately.”

“We are still badly snowed in,” frowned the Governor of Cordonia. “My armies will never reach Targa in time to be of any help.”

“I can help with that,” offered Prince Oscar. “I can have my ships transport your soldiers to Dalek. It will still take a fair amount of time, but I think it will at least get the bulk of your troops here in time.”

“We can’t afford for spies to see the soldiers boarding the ships,” warned Alex.

“And they won’t,” promised Governor Fernandez. “My men will not be wearing uniforms, and we can load Prince Oscar’s ships at night from several different cities. I have also prepared a disinformation campaign to keep the spies from noticing the lack of soldiers in the cities. False reports of army activity will spread through the cities so that anyone wondering where all the soldiers went will be satisfied with what they hear.”

The king waited to be sure that the conversation was ended before taking back control of the meeting.

“Anyone else who needs to move armies to be prepared for the invasion will need to start thinking about doing that very soon. The first Federation armies destined for Alcea will be coming through Doors in the city of Barouk in Lanoir. From the time they step through those Doors, they have allotted themselves thirteen days for all of their armies to rally at our major cities. The last armies to arrive on our soil will appear in Danver Shores on day nine of those thirteen days, giving Tagaret only four days to halt their march. All of the other armies will be somewhere in between those mentioned. General Gregor has created maps for each of you. The maps detail each of the Federation armies and where they are supposed to be on each of those thirteen days. Do not take these maps as a certainty. The locations are what the Federation plans, not necessarily where they will actually be. In some cases, our forces will be trying to slow down some of those armies.”

The king paused to gaze around the room. He saw a lot of nervousness among the group, but he thought little of it. He was also nervous. No matter how much they planned, King Arik knew that things would change the moment the fighting started.

“All right then,” continued the king. “I think it is time to break up into groups and finalize your plans. I want a report of those plans before you leave Tagaret. If there is any need for assistance from the crown, make sure you get it before you leave here. This will be our last meeting before the war begins.”

The assembly broke up into provincial groups and spread out to different areas of the large room. Alexander Tork, figuring that this would be his last chance to speak to the leaders before hostilities

broke out, decided to touch base with each group. He started with Lanoir where General Za-hong, Bin-lu, and Rut-ki were talking quietly in the corner.

"Lanoir will be first to receive the Federation," Alex said in way of a greeting. "How do you feel about your preparations?"

"Good for the most part," answered General Za-hong. "Bin-lu seems to have considered everything."

"Not everything," frowned Bin-lu. "We have significant surprises in store for the enemy, but I am still anxious. Perhaps it is because I have traveled with the likes of Jenneva and Tanya, but our mages do not appear capable of much in the way of offensive magic."

"The Lanoirian army has never depended upon magicians," retorted General Za-hong. "The strength of our army has always been in numbers. The strategy was to overwhelm your opponent."

"The numbers are not on our side this time," countered Rut-ki. "We must learn to be more clever than our opponents if we hope to survive."

Alex turned and glanced at the Tyronian mage. Theos stood quietly behind the king, watching everyone, but remaining silent. He turned back to the three Lanoirians.

"I cannot speak for King Arik on this matter," Alex said softly, "but perhaps you could borrow Theos, the new mage. I understand that his offensive magic is quite impressive."

"I will discuss that with King Arik," replied Bin-lu, "but I suspect that Theos is a replacement for Fredrik. There was much talk at the previous meeting about the last remaining Claw of Alutar. Prince Oscar wants a mage to constantly shield the king. I would be surprised if Theos was not holding a shield over the king right now."

"Does King Arik expect an assassin among his advisors?" asked General Za-hong.

"That is not the right question," retorted Rut-ki. "I am sure that King Arik trusts everyone in this room. It is Theos holding the shields and his decision to do so. He does not know any of us, and I think that is an advantage. He will not let his guard down because the threat seems familiar. I know that feeling. When I was accepted into the Knights of Alcea, I did not know the rest of you, so I could not be lulled into complacency."

Alex nodded with understanding. "I do think you need a battle mage in Lanoir. If Theos is not available, speak to Jenneva. She might know someone you can use. Remember that each Federation army has four black-cloaks assigned to it. That is twenty-four battle mages you will have to deal with."

Alex turned and walked away. When he reached the corner of the room where the Sordoan contingent was meeting, he saw a map

spread out over the table. He stopped near the table and studied the map while the others seemed engrossed in their discussion.

"We will only have at best two-thousand mercenaries," complained Captain Azule of the Sarga Mercenaries. "You can't possibly expect us to survive for even a day against twenty-thousand men."

"We will have the dwarves and elves, too," countered Captain Orteka of the Kadin Claws. "And the valley is quite enclosed. I think we can hold them there for several days."

"The dwarves will be exhausted," Captain Grecho of the Cidal Mercenaries interjected. "They do not ride as we do. They will have to run all the way from the coast just to get into position. No one should expect them to immediately dive into battle."

"My people will fight," proclaimed Prince Darok, a dwarven prince and Knight of Alcea.

"Providing everything goes well at Pontek," frowned Governor Mobami. "I will not lie to you, men. I am not happy with the assignment given to you, but there is no better strategy for defeating the Federation. General Omirro's Federation troops out of Caldar are the biggest threat against Sordoa. The terrain between Caldar and the capital is fairly open, and it will be almost impossible to stop his drive to Trekum. We must put the majority of our forces against him. You will just have to do the best you can against the forces coming from Gortha. Find a way to slow them down until we have eliminated Omirro's army and then we will come to your aid."

"If I might make a suggestion," Alex said softly as he moved from the map to join the group. "Zack has been spreading ghastly tales about the dwarves in Zara, particularly to the armies that will be coming from Gortha."

"Why?" asked Prince Darok.

"Zack and I have discussed the problem you will be facing in Sordoa," explained Alex. "You will be badly outnumbered, and Captain Grecho is correct. Your people will be exhausted, Prince Darok. That is, they will be exhausted if they have to immediately jump into battle, but there is another way. If Zack can create enough fear in the hearts of the Federation soldiers, the mere sight of dwarves might buy you some time. If a representative group were to meet the enemy under a flag of truce, you just might gain a day's delay, and that day will give the dwarves a chance to refresh their strength."

"What kind of stories has Zack been spreading?" asked the dwarven prince.

Alex grinned mischievously. "Only that the dwarves wear invincible armor, and that King Arik considers a dwarf warrior worth one-hundred humans. It has been said that you dwarves can stride

into the enemy army with your huge battleaxes and slay a legion without getting a scratch in return."

Prince Darok's loud laugh caught the attention of the entire room, and conversation halted for a moment. "Well then," guffawed the dwarven prince, "we will have to dress accordingly for the part. I will have our smiths work up something very impressive for the Federation lads."

The mercenary captains felt their spirits lift as their chances of survival rose just a bit. Alex turned and headed for the Targa delegation, which was actually a combination of the Cordonia and Targa teams as the Cordonian army would be joining the fighting to save Tagaret. Baron Timor of Southland was speaking.

"The timing is the critical part of this. General Fortella's Federation armies only have an eight-day march to Tagaret from Mya. If the Cordonian army and the Army of the West are to come up behind him in time to be of any use, we cannot assemble in Southland. It is too far away. We need to be much closer, and if we are closer, we risk alerting the enemy that we are onto their plan. I do not see an easy solution to this problem."

"Fortella's army just has to be slowed down," offered Lieutenant Montbalm from Tor. "Fell trees across the path of his army."

"Merely felling trees across his path will not be sufficient," interjected Clint who was mingling with the group. "Fortella is a respectable opponent. In fact, the Federation has put some of their best generals in Force Targa. Capturing Tagaret is a high priority for them. Both Fortella and Bledsoe are known for driving their men beyond reason. General Pryblick is not so highly regarded, but his force is merely for support. It will take cleverness to slow down either Fortella or Bledsoe."

"Abatis," commented Alex. "Do not merely fell trees for the enemy, but fell them properly."

Lieutenant Montbalm stared at Alex in confusion. "Explain."

"If you can find appropriate spots along Fortella's path," explained Alex, "fell giant trees, not across his path, but rather with the tops facing the enemy. The maze of branches will act as further impediments to clearing the road. It will also give your archers an excellent chance to pick off those men sent ahead to clear the road. If properly done, it can waste a tremendous amount of the enemy's time."

"And what is a proper place?" asked Baron Timor.

"You must not block just the road," answered Alex, "but the forest as well. You must choose a spot where a river or cliff limits the enemy's options. In that narrowed area, create a wall of abatis and hide your archers behind it."

“Harassing General Fortella’s men will fall to my people,” frowned Prince Garong, a prince of the elves and a Knight of Alcea. “The elves will be hesitant to cause such a massive destruction of trees.”

“I understand.” Alex nodded sympathetically. “King Arik will supply lumbermen who are skilled in that area, but you will need to protect those men, and do not let your people’s objections halt the lumbermen from their duties. If Tagaret falls, all of Alcea falls with it.“

“There is truth in Alex’s words,” added Clint. “These thirteen days will be the most trying in all our lives. If the Federation loses all of the other battles, they will still win the war by capturing Tagaret and King Arik. We must not let that happen.”

Alex nodded in agreement and turned to seek out Jenneva. He had only taken a few steps when he felt a hand upon his shoulder. He turned to find Governor Fernandez, and his old friend held a grim expression on his face.

“I have sad news from Cordonia,” the governor said softly. “Lyda has died. Can you get word to Karl?”

Sadness filled Alex’s heart, but he did not nod in agreement. “How did it happen?”

“We have had the most severe winter ever recorded,” answered Governor Fernandez. “The weight of the snow collapsed the roof where she was staying. There was nothing that could be done for her.”

Alex nodded in understanding. “I do not think the time is right to tell Karl that his wife has died. The news will devastate him, and he is about to enter an extremely trying time. The next four weeks will determine if Karl survives the coming ordeal himself. I think the news can wait until that is over.”

Chapter 8

Preparations for War

The wintry winds tore through the streets of Tagaret with a frigidness that caused almost everyone to huddle inside their homes and shops. Those few who braved the foul weather pulled their coats tightly around them, but it hardly mattered. Whether they were soldiers on patrol, or a merchant's delivery person, each and every one of them was chilled to the bone, and the cause was not just the cold wind. Whipped along the streets of Tagaret, the winds carried a malevolent, ethereal entity, and its essence touched the mind of each being as it passed. The demon was searching.

Eventually, D'Artim found the information that he was looking for. He detached himself from the winds and soared to the cobbler located less than a block from the gates to the Royal Palace. The shop was closed, as were the others on the block, but such things could not deter a demon. D'Artim circled the shop and then flew through the wall. The cobbler was immediately alerted to the intruder, and the old man shoved his work aside. He cocked his head as he gazed around the small shop, trying to see the unseen.

"You have sensed my arrival," D'Artim said approvingly as he materialized into his corporeal form. "What is this?" he asked as he waved a claw around the room. "Have you forgotten your mission? Have you decided to spend your remaining days making shoes for the humans?"

The Claw of Alutar narrowed his gaze as he stared at the demon. "I am not to be interfered with," replied Artimor. "Why have you come?"

"Such love for your father," chided D'Artim.

"You are not my father," retorted Artimor. "Alutar is my Master. I recognize no other. You are only the carrier of his seed."

D'Artim appeared shocked and disappointed by the rebuke, but he recovered quickly. "I am your father," he declared, "but the point is hardly worth arguing over."

"Why have you come?"

"To make sure that you do not fail in your assignment, as did your brothers and sister. You are the last of the Claws. You must succeed."

"And so I shall," Artimor stated emphatically. "I am the Claw of my Master. I was created to succeed."

D'Artim sighed. He was used to demonkin being invested with arrogance, but this one was going too far. "The war is beginning, and we have had no report of your success. We need more assurances of your ability to strike down the Mage's heroes. They are all in Tagaret at this very moment, and here I find you mending shoes. Is that supposed to fill me with confidence of your great abilities?"

"I have no need to give you assurances," retorted the old man. "Do the other demons even know you are here?" D'Artim did not answer and the Claw of Alutar snickered. "I didn't think so. You have always been one to seek an unfair advantage, even against friends."

D'Artim growled threateningly, and his clawed feet scratched furrows in the wooden floor as he approached the cobbler. "You will not belittle me, demonkin! You will treat me with respect, or I will end you miserable existence right here, right now. I will have to deal with Alutar's rage for doing so, but that will matter little to you. You will no longer exist."

Artimor backed up and nodded submissively. While his status as a Claw of Alutar made him subservient to none other than the Great Demon, he had no doubt that the demon could kill him, and he had just pushed too far. He ran his fingers through his think white hair and sighed.

"I apologize, but you of all demons should appreciate the need to do something properly. The other Claws of Alutar failed because they were overconfident, and because of their haste. I will not fall into such traps."

"I can appreciate such thoughts," frowned D'Artim, "but making shoes is hardly a proper use of your time. The war is upon us. You should be attacking them now. Are you even aware that all four of them sit less than a block away right now?"

"I am aware of their presence," retorted the cobbler, regaining a bit of his lost arrogance. "I have more than a few eyes and ears within the Royal Palace. Nothing they do escapes my notice. I am also aware that there are three-thousand Red Swords protecting them."

"There will always be soldiers protecting them," countered the demon.

"Not exactly," grinned the Claw of Alutar. "Once the war begins, those soldiers will have other tasks to attend to, sixty-thousand other tasks if I am correct."

"You plan to let the war start before striking?"

"I have already started to strike," smiled Artimor. "They just don't know it yet. When it is time for me to finish this task, the deaths of the Mage's heroes will be anticlimactic."

"Are you just hoping that the Federation soldiers will kill them?" quipped the demon. "That is not why you were created."

“I was created to see to their deaths,” countered Artimor. “Who actually draws the last breath out of their bodies is of little concern to Alutar. If the heroes should happen to fall to the blades of the Federation, so be it, but they will die one way or another. My spies within the palace walls have revealed the troop dispositions for the upcoming war. I will bring forth havoc to alter those plans and then I will strike. Nothing can stop me.”

* * * *

Colonel Dorfan of the 1st Corps nodded approvingly as he watched the black-cloaks cast their spells upon the snow. He knew little about magic, but he valued its use at times like this. Camp Destiny had been hit with an unusually late snowstorm, and the snow had accumulated to a great depth. Fortunately, each Federation army had a stable of black-cloaks for times when non-magical means just would not accomplish the task. He had set the mages to work removing the snow so that the valley was clear before the first armies arrived. Satisfied with the mages’ progress, Colonel Dorfan turned his horse and rode towards the general’s office. When he arrived, he dismounted and entered General Tauman’s office.

“What is the state of the valley, Dorfan?” General Tauman asked upon seeing the colonel.

“The snow should be gone by dusk today,” the colonel reported. “It will take another two days to remove the moisture from the ground so that the troops do not get mired in mud, but we will be done before the first armies arrive.”

“Excellent.” The general nodded. “I am going to keep your men busy the next two weeks. I want a continual sweep of Blood Highway everyday from now on until all the armies are in Alcea. I want to know the position of each army and whether they are where they are supposed to be, and I don’t want to have to wait for such information. The first day one of the armies is behind schedule, I want to send a runner to the commanding officer to rectify the problem.”

“I will see to it,” replied Colonel Dorfan.

“I also need forty-eight of your men to go to Alcea,” continued the general. “I want two men to travel each of the proposed routes and check to make sure that our supplies have not been tampered with. We are moving a lot of men through these portals in a very short timeframe. If we need to replenish supplies, I want to know about it now before the armies start arriving.”

“Why two men, Sir?”

“We can afford to lose a few men to get this information,” answered the general, “but it is information that we must have. I want two men sent on each route so that we are sure of getting the information. Instruct each team to use the proper procedures for

verifying a hidden cache. That way if some of the men do come to harm, we will still get what we need."

"You are expecting trouble?" frowned the colonel. "We have never felt the need to double up before."

"We are on the verge of war, Colonel. Of course I expect trouble. Even if the enemy is totally unaware of our coming, things always seem to get hairy when time is short. I plan to take no chances with this invasion. The 1st Corps will ensure that nothing goes wrong on this end until the very last army returns home. Is that clear?"

The colonel nodded, but his brow creased with concern. Tauman and Dorfan had worked together for years, and the general immediately noticed the concern.

"Speak your mind, Dorfan."

"I know you were planning on us being part of the invasion of Alcea, General. Why have we ended up being caretakers of this valley while a war is being waged?"

The general looked towards the door and the windows before speaking. "Because Grand General Kyrga is a poor excuse for an officer," the general said softly and with evident disgust in his voice. "The 1st Corps is the finest fighting unit in the world, and that fool has us acting as quartermasters. He says that he is afraid to entrust the secrecy of the portals to any other unit, but the portals are no longer secret. I should have been in charge of Force Targa."

"But Kyrga chose Fortella instead?"

"Of course," spat the general. "Fortella has charmed Kyrga, and the Grand General has made him his most favored general. The truth is, Dorfan, we could have sacked Tagaret in a most impressive manner and brought the boy king to kneel in disgrace before the emperor, and that is the real problem. I suspect that Kyrga fears that the emperor would make me Grand General when we returned victorious."

"You think Fortella will fail?"

The general thought for a moment and shook his head. "Fortella is a decent general, but he is not a quick thinker. He is like a bulldog that has his teeth dug into your leg. He won't let go until you are dead. His army will sack Tagaret without a problem. That is probably why they teamed that coward Whitman up with him. Fortella is probably one of the few generals who can keep Whitman in line."

"The Aertan general?" questioned the colonel. "I have never met him."

"More to your credit," scoffed General Tauman. "I am surprised that Whitman didn't figure out a way to be exempted from going to Alcea. The man doesn't deserve to wear a uniform. Fortella will have to spend some time watching Whitman just to make sure he doesn't desert."

“Maybe you could make a deal with General Whitman,” suggested Colonel Dorfan. “Switch the 1st Corps with the 24th Corps.”

“And serve under Fortella?” balked General Tauman. “I think not. The 1st Corps will get a chance to fight the horse countries. That will have to do. Enough of this talk, Colonel. You have a great deal to accomplish and little time to get it all done. Get those runners out onto Blood Highway and those scouts sent to Alcea. This war is starting in mere days.”

* * * *

The Blood Highway was a wide road, and little stone markers were set alongside it every league. The markers showed the number of leagues from the western gates of Valdo, and General Montero watched this particular marker pass with interest. He turned and glanced back at his 15th Corps behind him and then looked forward at the tail end of the 13th Corps barely visible in the distance.

“How are we doing, Colonel?” the general asked.

The colonel pulled a map from his pouch and consulted it. “Right on schedule. We have another four hours before camp.”

“Keep them moving, Colonel,” instructed General Montero. “As long as the 13th Corps doesn’t falter, keep them in sight. If they do falter, bypass them, and don’t let General Ruppert give you any guff about it. I am taking a squad out for a ride in the Dark Forest. I will meet you at the camp before morning.”

The colonel saluted and then nodded knowingly as the general turned off the road and called for his personal squad to assemble. Whenever the 15th Corps got near this area of the Federation, the general always left the column to visit his brother. Everyone knew about the sickly prince, but no one mentioned Prince Harold. His name was never spoken within range of the general’s hearing, not if you wanted to stay in the good graces of General Montero.

The squad formed around the general and headed into the forest. Several hours later, they approached a large castle upon the hill. Shouts rang out from the wall, and the Royal Family Pennant was raised to welcome the Crown Prince of Ertak. General Montero let his eyes gaze up at the ramparts. The soldiers of the castle stood proudly visible, knowing that the heir was arriving. He nodded with approval. Captain Ergard was waiting in the courtyard for the general, as he usually was, but General Montero sensed a certain nervousness in the officer that had never been present before. The general said nothing as he dismounted and let his horse be led away. The captain saluted and then led the general into the sitting room as was customary.

“I have ordered a meal to be prepared for you and your men,” stated Captain Ergard. “Will you be spending the night?”

“No,” answered the general. “How is my brother?”

“He has not gotten any worse than he was on your last visit,” answered the captain.

“Nor any better?”

“I have noticed no change.”

The general stared into the captain’s eyes, trying to determine what it was that the captain was afraid to say, but he could determine nothing.

“Bring him down,” ordered the general.

The captain started sweating profusely. Most of the visits by General Montero were just to speak with the captain and discuss the health of Prince Harold. It was rare for the general to actually see his brother, and he had never before ordered the sickly prince to descend out of the tower.

“I do not think it is wise to ask the prince to make such a journey,” the captain said nervously.

“Why not?” the general asked sternly. “What are you not telling me, Ergard?”

The captain swallowed hard as his eyes widened in fear. He thought he would be able to act calmly when the general visited, but it was obvious that General Montero knew something was amiss. Delaying the truth could only make things worse.

“Prince Harold is not here,” the captain answered meekly. “The king sent soldiers to take him to be healed.”

The general’s hand moved so swiftly that the blow took the captain by surprise. He stumbled backwards and collided with a chair. Both the chair and the captain tumbled to the floor. When the captain rolled over to get back to his feet, there was a sword extended towards him, and the tip moved towards his throat.

“This had better be an amusing story,” spat the general. “I am not in a kindly mood.”

“A colonel from the 11th Corps arrived with a full regiment,” the captain replied in a quaking voice. “He had orders from the king to have the prince inspected by a black-cloak. I resisted at first, but it was made clear to me that the king’s wishes would not be denied. I still tried to arrest the colonel, but the mage attacked me. That is when the colonel explained the situation in clearer terms.”

“Clearer terms?” the general echoed in disbelief. “What are you talking about? Why was I not told about this immediately?”

“The colonel explained that the king specifically forbade anyone to tell you. He claimed that he did not want you to worry on the eve of war, nor did he want you to think that Prince Harold would take your place while you were away. I finally agreed to let the mage examine him.”

“That does not explain his absence,” snapped General Montero.

“I am getting to that,” stammered the captain. “The black-cloak examined Prince Harold and thought that his illness was curable, but it would require moving the prince to another location. I told them that such a thing was impossible and would not be agreed to, but they had already proposed the trip to Prince Harold, and the prince had agreed to go with them. They promised to return him before anyone noticed him missing.”

“Before anyone noticed?” balked the general. “Do you mean other than the company of men stationed here? You are not only a fool, but you insist on making me look like a fool.”

“No.” The captain shook his head vigorously, and the general had to retract his sword slightly to avoid slashing the captain’s throat. “No one knows. I had all of the men assemble in the rear courtyard for an inspection while the colonel’s men carried the prince out. No one knows that he is not here. His meals are still delivered and his room is still tidied. I altered the staff’s schedule so that there is always a plausible reason for the prince to be out of his room. No one knows that he is no longer residing here.”

“Except my father and a regiment of the 11th Corps,” scowled the general. “What was the colonel’s name?”

“Colonel Belasko,” answered the captain.

The general frowned and shook his head. “I have never heard of Colonel Belasko. Are you sure he was with the 11th Corps?”

“I am positive,” answered Captain Ergard. “If he was not with the 11th Corps, I would not have believed that he was sent by the king. They guard the Royal Palace.”

General Montero sheathed his sword and turned away from the captain. He paced across the room and stood staring into the fireplace. The captain hesitantly got up off the floor and quietly stood at attention. A few minutes passed in silence and then the general turned around and glared at the captain.

“You have failed me, Captain Ergard,” the general said threateningly. “Do you know what the punishment for your failure is?”

The captain swallowed hard and nodded barely perceptibly. The general had stressed the weight of the responsibility on him many times in the past, and the captain knew that it was futile to try and run.

“I beg you to give me another chance to serve you. I will find Prince Harold and restore him to his room upstairs, even if I have to seize him out of the Royal Palace.”

“You will do exactly that, Captain,” replied the general. “You have one-hundred men under your command. You have three tasks to accomplish and only three weeks to accomplish them. The first is to

bring my brother back here and guard him, if he is still alive. And he is not to leave when you return him to the tower. Not for any reason."

The captain nodded exaggeratedly. "If he is alive? Do you think the healing attempt might kill him?"

"Healing attempt?" The general snorted derisively. "Prince Harold has been kept here to keep the king from killing him. Nothing that Belasko said changes that. I fear that my brother is already dead. No doubt the king plans the same for me, but I know how to play this game as well as he does. You will do my bidding while I am away at war. The king will not expect anything to happen while I am in Alcea."

"I shall," the captain replied with eagerness. "What are the other two tasks to be accomplished in your absence?"

"You will kill my father's two bastard sons."

* * * *

Lord Kommoron entered the emperor's office in the Imperial Palace in Despair and sat in the chair before the desk, not bothering to bow. Emperor Jaar looked up with a scowl upon his face.

"You must show respect to the emperor," complained the black-cloak appearing as Emperor Jaar. "Do not abandon your conditioning at this stage of the game. You might slip up in public."

"Do not lecture me," the Lord Kommoron replied testily. "I have been playing this game since you were but a youth. What do you have to report?"

"Report?" echoed the impersonator. "This is the most boring task I have ever undertaken. I never imagined that being the emperor could be so lonely. Everyone is afraid to talk to me. I would discover more by skulking through the corridors at night and listening to the chambermaids chatter."

The Chosen One sighed and rose to his feet. He glanced at the emperor on his way to the door. "You will not skulk the halls at night. You stick to playing the part given to you. I will get my information elsewhere."

Lord Kommoron really needed to visit the emperor only to create a reason for coming to the Imperial Palace. His real goal was to meet with Grand General Kyrga, but he knew that such a visit had to be seen as incidental to avoid rumors spreading about a secret alliance with the Grand General. Fortunately, Kyrga was in his office and the noble did not have to suffer through an embarrassing wait. He waited until the guard retreated and closed the door before speaking.

"What is the strength of the new armies?" asked Lord Kommoron.

"We have six new armies fully formed," answered the Grand General. "I am still working on the seventh."

"And have the men I specifically asked for been given the

promotions?"

"They have," frowned the Grand General, "but if you don't mind me asking, why those men? None of them are very distinguished. I certainly would have chosen others to receive the promotions to general."

"I reward those who are loyal to me," answered the noble, "and those men are known to be loyal. They will do fine as generals. Remember, Kyrga, there were some who thought you would be unfit for the position of Grand General. Look how wrong they were."

Kyrga smiled and frowned at the same time. He wasn't entirely sure if the noble was making fun of him or not. He wisely decided not to ask.

"What are we to do with these new armies?" Kyrga asked.

"Send Hedstorus to Giza, Larus to Farmin, and Kartacus to Valdo. Make sure that each of them understands that he reports only to you or the emperor. I do not want them taking orders from the local monarchs."

"The monarchs will not stand for that," warned Kyrga.

"The monarchs have no say in the matter," retorted Lord Kommoron. "Must I spell everything out for you, Grand General? These new armies are mine. They are to be put into place to balance anything the local monarchs can do to interfere with my destiny."

"I understand," Kyrga replied, still unsure of what the armies were meant to do. "What of the other armies?"

"General Brennus will remain here in Despair. The other three armies are meant for the countries west of the Barrier, but I fear that getting them in place in time will prove to be difficult."

"Blood Highway is closed," Kyrga pointed out. "The armies going to Alcea are all moving along it. It will not open up again until the last of the armies has gone through the portals."

"That will be too late," frowned the noble. "It hardly matters. Those three countries together aren't worth a mention in the scheme of things. Keep the fifth and sixth armies here in Despair. We will use them wherever we need them, but the others are moving out today. You can send the army going to Valdo by land, but use ships for those going to Farmin and Giza. I want all of the troops deployed in a matter of days."

"By ship?" balked the Grand General. "Do you know how many ships that will take?"

"No," scowled the noble, "and I do not care to know. That is not my problem, Kyrga. It is your problem. Do not bother me with minutiae. Get those troops in place before news of the battles in Alcea start arriving back here."

Chapter 9

Day One

Colonel Ednor of the 9th Corps woke with a start, an unclear sound lingering momentarily in his consciousness before fleeing. He felt as if he had just gone to sleep, but he quickly brushed the feeling aside. It was the eve of war and sleep would be a luxury for the next two weeks. The colonel rose to his feet to figure out what had woken him. He gazed around at the thousands of sleeping forms littering the floor of the valley known as Camp Destiny. He frowned when he saw no one stirring. Suddenly, he heard the sound again and whirled towards the corral. Although the horses were kept fairly distant from the troops, the colonel could see movement in that direction. He pulled his sheath over his head and moved off into the night. As he drew closer to the corrals, he saw soldiers leading the horses away. Racing towards the thieves, the colonel drew his sword and shouted loudly, waking the entire camp. As the colonel got closer, his brow creased with confusion. General Kolling, Commander of the 9th Corps, stood staring at the approaching colonel. Colonel Ednor sheathed his sword and slowed to a walk as he wondered what the general was doing with their horses. The general turned away from the approaching colonel and urged the soldiers leading the horses to continue with their task.

"What is going on?" Colonel Ednor asked the general.

"The 1st Corps are taking the horses for use by Team Cordonia," the general answered calmly. "Fresh horses are waiting for us in Lanoir. We discussed this possibility months ago, Colonel."

"I understand," frowned the colonel, "but I thought it was just a possibility. Why are they doing this in the dark of night?"

"I requested it," answered General Kolling as he watched hundreds of his men racing towards the corrals with their swords drawn. "Order your men back to camp before someone gets hurt here."

The colonel turned towards the charging horde and flushed with embarrassment. He waved his hands wildly over his head to get the men focused on him. "I will send them back to their beds."

"No," countermanded the general. "Instruct them to get the rest of the camp up and ready to move out. The morning meal should be simple but nourishing. We have a long day ahead of us."

Colonel Ednor moved towards the approaching men and shouted

orders to them. The soldiers sheathed their swords and turned around, and the colonel returned to the general's side. He glanced up at the night sky and frowned deeply.

"When I woke moments ago, I had the feeling that I had not slept very long. I quickly dismissed the feeling, but the sky tells me that the feeling was accurate. Why are we leaving at such an early hour?"

"A number of reasons," answered General Kolling, "not the least of which is that I am a cautious man. We are stepping into hostile territory this morning, and such a step should never be taken lightly. There is also a time difference between Zara and Alcea. It is closer to morning there, and I want to time our entrance to occur before dawn."

"I understand," the colonel replied, but the general was not finished talking.

"We are also the first unit to be deployed to Alcea," the general continued. "I promised that we would report to General Tauman on the experience. He is particularly interested in finding out how close his estimates were regarding the timing of getting completely oriented once we arrive in Alcea. Our results will be used to make corrections in the estimates for the units that follow us. Gather the other colonels, and I will address all of you over the morning meal."

Colonel Ednor saluted and dashed off. General Kolling turned back to watch the corrals being emptied, but his thoughts were not on the actions of the soldiers leading the horses away. His thoughts were focused on the monumental step his army would be taking in a very short while. Within the hour, the first men of the 9th Corps would make history as they launched the invasion of Alcea. Beaming with pride, General Kolling smiled inwardly, knowing that he would be remembered for leading the vanguard in the greatest war the world had ever seen. The general pivoted and marched towards the camp to address his colonels.

General Kolling found the group of colonels sitting outside his tent. The men were eating bread and dried fruit, but the general declined an offer from the men to join in. He was not hungry. He sat quietly for a while letting the men eat and then he addressed them. He spoke about the great significance of their next move and the part that it would play in history. He encouraged the colonels to share the spirit of pride with their regiments and then he got down to specifics.

"The cavalry will be carrying their saddles through the portals," he began. "There are four-thousand horses waiting for us at the farm we are going to. That will be two-thousand for the 9th Corps and two-thousand for General Gertz's 25th Corps. It will be a full league before we meet up with General Gertz, so it is up to us to lead the additional horses to the rendezvous point. Two of the infantry regiments will be

assigned to that task."

One of the colonels raised his hand and the general nodded to him to speak.

"My regiment can handle half of the horses," volunteered the colonel.

The general nodded in agreement, and another colonel volunteered his regiment to handle the other half of the horses. The general agreed.

"I know we have discussed this before," the general continued, "but I will go over it one last time. Colonel Ednor, your regiment will be the first to go through the portal. Your men are tasked to secure the area so the rest of 9th Corps can get through the portal safely. The cavalry regiments will go next. That will give your riders time to choose horses and get saddled up while the rest of the army is forming. Be quick about your task because the army will not be standing around on the farm to wait for your men. As soon as the army is formed, we are moving out, and I need your riders on the road before that happens. I want a full company to secure the rendezvous site where we will meet up with General Gertz, and I want a squad sent forward to verify the supplies cache at the end of today's march."

"What about civilians?" asked one of the colonels. "How are they to be treated?"

"The civilians present on the farm are agents of the Federation," answered General Kolling. "They are not to be harmed. Other than those few Alceans, all others are to be killed. None will be spared." There were several surprised looks and the general sighed. "Remember this. The attack on Alcea is supposed to be a surprise, but the enemy knows that we are coming. They just do not know when and where we will arrive. They think we will come on ships, but we will be using portals instead. That should allow us complete surprise, but we also have a march of thirteen days before we reach Ongchi, the longest march of any of the Federation armies. We cannot afford for word of our approach to reach the city before we do. Kill them all."

The general expected weakness and sympathy for the natives from some of the soldiers under his command, but he would not accept such attitudes from his officers. He remained silent for a moment as he studied each colonel in turn, looking for any sign of weakness. He saw none.

"All right," stated the general. "We only have two hours before the dawn in Alcea. Colonel Ednor, assemble your regiment near the portal and prepare to enter the world of the enemy. The rest of you gather your men and keep them ready to move out at any time. I want this entire army through that portal in under an hour. Do not disappoint me."

The colonels rose and quickly dispersed. Colonel Ednor shouted orders to his men, and they ran to get into formation. He led them to the portal and explained what he expected of them. When he was finished he noticed Colonel Dorfan of the 1st Corps standing beside him. He was holding a key.

"Are you ready, Colonel Ednor?" asked Colonel Dorfan.

Ednor turned and glanced towards General Kolling who was standing nearby. The general nodded authorization to move out.

"The 9th Corps is ready to go into battle," he declared.

Colonel Dorfan smiled and nodded approvingly. He walked to the portal and unlocked the Door, sliding the key into his pouch.

"Should you need to come back, the portal will not be locked. The key has served its purpose. Good luck, Colonel Ednor."

Colonel Ednor waved to the squad chosen to go through first, and they quickly moved to stand in front of the portal. The rest of the regiment stood ten abreast with each company in a tightly packed line. Colonel Ednor gave the order to go.

The squad leader opened the Door and rushed through it, closely followed by the rest of the squad. As the last man of the squad went through the Door, Colonel Ednor moved to the portal and waited. The first company column queued up behind him. The wait was only a minute, but it seemed much longer to the colonel. Eventually, the squad leader stuck his head out of the portal and announced that the barn was secure. With a wave of his hand for the regiment to follow him, Colonel Ednor stepped into Alcea.

The other side of the portal opened into a large barn on a farm northwest of the Lanoirian city of Barouk. The initial squad quickly secured the barn and checked outside to see if anyone was around. They signaled that there was no one nearby. Colonel Ednor stood near the portal as his men filed through. He assigned each company to a specific area of the farm as they came through. A few minutes later, the last of his men came through the portal and the next regiment immediately followed. Colonel Ednor gave up his post at the portal and moved out of the barn to check on his men. Unseen by any of the soldiers flowing through the portal, two pairs of tiny eyes watched everything from the rafters of the barn.

"Get word of this to Bin-lu immediately," whispered the tiny green man.

"Why me?" scowled the little blue woman. "I can stay and keep an eye on the Zarans just as well as you can. You go tell Bin-lu."

"Bin-lu said he needed to know right away," countered the male fairy. "He needs to do something with their supplies before they reach the first day's cache. You had better hurry or Bin-lu will be very angry. He might even grab you with those sticky hands of his. I bet

that glue would never come off your wings. You might never fly again."

"He would punish you just the same," retorted the female fairy. "Besides, Bin-lu would never harm a fairy. You are just making that up to scare me. I think you should be the one to go."

The male fairy merely smiled and looked away. He watched the Federation soldiers file into the barn and out the large barn doors. For several minutes, neither fairy spoke, but as the male had suspected, the female caved in.

"Oh bother," she scowled. "I do believe that you would refuse to notify Bin-lu just to win this argument. I will go this time, but you owe me one."

The male fairy grinned with victory as the female leaped from her perch and darted into the predawn darkness.

* * * *

The rendezvous point was where the secondary road met the main road running between the city of Barouk and the capital city, Ongchi. The sun was rising as General Kolling arrived at the intersection, and he saw General Gertz and his 25th Corps halted on the main road, waiting for the 9th Corps to precede him. He rode over to the Aertan general and halted.

"Any problems?" asked General Kolling.

"Not a one," General Gertz replied. "We did run into a few fishermen a while ago, but they were quickly dispatched. Any problems on your end?"

"Everything is going smoothly," General Kolling answered with a shake of his head. "Is your cavalry mounted yet?"

"Almost. Judging from the looks of the nags that your men delivered, I can see that you kept the good ones for yourselves."

General Kolling smiled. He had no doubts that his men would choose the best of the corrals for themselves, but he was sure that Gertz was exaggerating. "You will have to complain to General Tauman about that," he replied. "His men did the purchasing of the horses. Brighten up. It is not as if we are racing to Ongchi. The horses will not get overworked."

"I suppose not," General Gertz grudgingly agreed. "I sure don't look forward to walking all the way to Ongchi. Did you send men ahead to check the cache?"

"Of course. I expect a report back soon. I will send a runner back to relay the message to you. See you in camp tonight."

General Kolling did not wait for a response. He turned his horse and rejoined his own column, leaving the 25th Corps to wait their turn. An hour later his advance scouts reported back. The cache was intact and undisturbed.

“Excellent,” smiled General Kolling. “Have one of your men report that to General Gertz. I also want another rider sent back to the portal. He is to report to General Tauman and tell him that everything is going smoothly. He is expecting a report of our progress so make sure that the man you send can describe our location and approximate hour.”

* * * *

The coast of Lanoir between Elmor and Ongchi was mostly flat and level, but there was one small section of the shoreline that rose vertically from the sea. That section of Lanoir was known as Hun-lo Heights. Hun-lo Heights was only a few leagues in length, but it had long served as an obstacle to building a road between the two cities. One of the good things to come out of the reign of Emperor Hanchi was a solution to that problem. Early in his reign, the emperor put prisoners to work hauling stones to the base of the cliffs. The stones were dumped into the water at the base of the cliffs. Over a period of years, the stones were spread along the base of Hung-lo Heights to enable a road to be built connecting the two cities. Far up on the top of the cliffs, a Lanoirian engineer was once again modifying Hung-lo Heights, and two Knights of Alcea stood by his side.

Bin-lu and Rut-ki gazed at a series of huge vats and the long train of Lanoirians working to fill them. A wooden ramp had been built to allow the workers to dump their buckets into the vats, and the line of workers appeared to have no end. Coming out of the bottom of each vat was a large bamboo pipe, and the numerous pipes extended to one final vat that sat lower than the others. The bamboo pipe coming out of that final vat ran to the edge of the cliff and then straight down to the stone road below. The Knights of Alcea walked to the edge of the cliff and stared down. The engineer followed them and spoke when he saw what they were looking at.

“It is all fed by gravity,” Cho-sung said proudly. “The bamboo pipe running along the base of Hun-lo Heights is slanted towards Elmor, although the slope is almost imperceptible.”

“And it will work as you described?” asked Bin-lu. Cho-sung’s face adopted an injured expression, and Bin-lu smiled apologetically. “I do not doubt your word, Cho-sung, but everything depends upon this working properly. Have you tested it?”

“There is no need to test it,” replied the engineer. “The principle of gravity is well-known.”

“I know that the oil will flow downhill,” frowned Bin-lu, “but you have more than that going on here. I have ridden along the road below, and I do not understand how the oil will get out of the pipe.”

“Ah,” brightened the engineer. “That is simple. There are holes drilled into the bamboo pipe at regular intervals over a length of three

leagues. Each hole is currently plugged, but the plugs will come out with very little pressure applied to them. When the oil is released from the final vat, it will flow through the pipe until it reaches the end. At that point it will start backing up towards the vat. The pressure will force the plugs out of their holes, and the oil will be dispensed."

Bin-lu did not appear convinced and Rut-ki knew that he was going to ask for a test of the system, but he never got the chance. A blue fairy shot down out of the sky and landed on Bin-lu's shoulder.

"The enemy has arrived!" announced the fairy. "They are in Barouk."

Bin-lu turned to the engineer and said, "There is no time to test the pipe. The Federation soldiers will arrive in Elmor four days from now. You have just over a week to get all of the vats filled. Rut-ki and I must go."

Without waiting for a response, the Knights of Alcea ran away from the edge of the cliff. They mounted their unicorns and took to the air, the tiny blue woman still clinging to Bin-lu's ear.

"Should I return to the barn?" the fairy shouted into the rushing wind.

"No," replied Bin-lu. "Fly directly to Tagaret. Tell the Bringer that the invasion has begun. Do not dally on the way. Many things must be put into action now."

The fairy nodded in understanding, but Bin-lu could not see the tiny woman. The fairy let go of Bin-lu's ear and let the wind carry her off his shoulder. Her body tumbled away until she spread her wings and banked sharply to the north.

"She's a funny one," chuckled Rut-ki as she pulled alongside Bin-lu. "Very playful. What needs to be done in Tagaret?"

"Many things," replied Bin-lu. "I only know a small amount of the plans of the others, but I do remember hearing that the Melbin City Guard was to march north on day one of the invasion. Each province needs to know that the war has actually started. The Federation will be on a predictable schedule from now on."

Hun-lo Heights was far from the approaching Federation army, and the flight of the unicorns consumed most of the day. The sun was already declining by the time the two Knights of Alcea landed well north of the Barouk-Ongchi Road. They landed in a large glade and dismounted, stretching their weary limbs. Moments later, an elf walked out of the trees and greeted them.

"So it has started," stated Elandros.

"It has started," agreed Bin-lu. "How did you know?"

"I have had my people keeping watch on the campsite that they have chosen for their first night. Twenty riders appeared this morning

to check on their cache of supplies, not merely two riders like a few days ago. These riders also wore uniforms and returned to the east instead of continuing along the road towards Ongchi."

"I wonder if General Kolling will have those riders check tomorrow's cache in the morning or whether he was just concerned about the first day?" mused Bin-lu.

"We will not know the answer to that until the morning," answered Elandros. "Do you want my people to take care of today's cache?"

Bin-lu nodded. "We shall proceed according to the plan for now."

Elandros raised a hand over his head and made a signal with his fingers. Back among the trees surrounding the glade, several elves silently slipped away. Bin-lu stuck a finger into his pocket and woke up his fairy. Shrimp leaped to Bin-lu's shoulder and looked around to get his bearings.

"Has it begun then?" the fairy chirped enthusiastically.

"It has begun," smiled the Knight of Alcea. "Your naps will be few and far between now. I have already sent a fairy to inform the Bringer, but Governor Za-chan must also be informed. Carry the word to Ongchi, but return quickly. Tonight we must spy on the enemy."

"I would never miss a chance to spy upon the enemy." Shrimp saluted briskly and darted upward.

Bin-lu returned his attention to the elf. "Rut-ki and I must go to the nearest village and start the evacuation plan. I am also going to have my people remove all of the hidden caches between here and Ongchi. That means that the Federation will start foraging tomorrow evening, or slightly earlier if they do send riders on ahead to check the supplies. Your men can rest tonight, but then they will have a long two weeks before them. Remember that it is not necessary to halt all of their foraging. The main point is to make them wary and fearful."

"With only one hundred men, it will not be possible to halt all of their foraging," Elandros responded, "but the Federation will feel our sting. Have no fear in that regard."

"Only one hundred?" frowned Rut-ki. "We were hoping for more than that."

"Sordoa has demanded a lot from the Sorelderal elves," replied Elandros. "Queen Alysa has been generous in her response to them. Elven archers will not only guard the prisoners, but they are also needed against General Ritka's army from Gortha. The Sordoans are spread thin." Bin-lu sighed and nodded in acceptance, but Elandros smiled and placed a reassuring hand on the Knight of Alcea's shoulder. "Do not fear. One-hundred elves will seem like an army to the Federation soldiers. We will strike their foragers without warning, whether it be night or day. Within a week, their soldiers will fear to

step off the Lanoirian road they travel."

"You are up against twenty-thousand men, Elandros," frowned Rut-ki, "and you are all that stands between them and Ongchi."

"We will not stand between them and the city they hope to raze," corrected the elf. "Nothing stands in their way at the moment. We do not plan to engage in battle with the Federation. My people will work in small, four-man teams. They will be spread throughout the forest so that no part of their column can safely forage. If the Federation tries to push into the forest to eliminate us, they will find nothing. Four elves can disappear so quickly that no human will be able to find them."

"I have seen the Sorelderal elves in action," Bin-lu said reassuringly to Rut-ki. "Believe what Elandros is saying. The elves are one with the forest. It is their home. Come. We have an evacuation to set in motion."

"I will wait here for your return," Elandros said in lieu of a farewell.

Bin-lu nodded in reply as he and Rut-ki mounted their unicorns. The nearest village was less than an hour away, and the Knights of Alcea kept their unicorns on the ground. As they approached the village, Bin-lu requested the unicorns to show their horns. The villagers halted their chores and lined the road to get a look at the amazing creatures. Bin-lu and Rut-ki halted in the very center of the village, and people gathered around to see what was going on.

"I am Bin-lu," the Knight of Alcea said loudly, "and this is Rut-ki. We are Knights of Alcea, and we bring news from King Arik and Governor Za-chan. Listen carefully for your lives are in danger. A huge enemy army is coming this way, and they will kill every last person they come across. You must gather your families tonight and flee into the woods. Do not travel on the Barouk-Ongchi Road. Move your families at least three leagues inland."

"Take only what is necessary to survive," added Rut-ki. "We do not think the army will destroy your village if no one is here, but you cannot afford to be slowed down in any event. That army will be here in the morning, and they will slay anyone who sees them. They do not want anyone to know that they are heading for Ongchi, so they will kill you all."

"We are to abandon our homes?" asked an old woman.

"Only for a time," answered Bin-lu. "In a few days the army will have passed by this village, and you will be able to return home, but I would suggest waiting at least a week before coming back. There is a chance that the army might turn around and try to retreat toward Barouk."

The villagers had other questions, lots of questions, but Bin-lu had

little time for repeating the same answers. He eventually explained that he had said all that he could say, and the villagers nodded glumly and returned to their homes to get ready for the journey inland. The Knights of Alcea rode onward, but they did not go very far. Just past the village was a new farmhouse and a very large barn, but the farm was a poor excuse for a commercial enterprise. The land was not yet cleared, and the corral only held eight horses and no cattle. The four men who lived in the farmhouse immediately came out of the house when they heard riders approaching. They stared at the unicorns and then saluted Bin-lu.

"You are the Knight of Alcea?" asked one of the non-uniformed soldiers.

"I am Bin-lu and this is Rut-ki. We are both Knights of Alcea. I trust that you have your wagons ready to roll?"

"Sitting in the barn," one of the men said with a wave towards the new barn. "Are we to leave now?"

"As soon as we are done talking." Bin-lu nodded. "I need to make sure that you understand your mission."

"We understand it," assured the soldier. "We have a map of the location of the cache and directions to the next unit along the Barouk-Ongchi Road. We will relay your orders to them and then transport the cache to the designated location."

"You are also to instruct the villagers to flee to the north," declared Rut-ki.

"Of course," nodded the solider. "That goes without saying. We will not leave anyone in the path of the enemy. You can count on us."

"We are counting on you," replied Bin-lu. "Move swiftly because you have little time to accomplish your mission. The enemy will be here in the morning."

Chapter 10

Team Barouk

As Bin-lu and Rut-ki returned to the glade to reunite with Elandros and his elves, Shrimp shot down through the trees and landed on Bin-lu's shoulder.

"Za-chan has been informed," reported the fairy. "He vowed to put everything in motion."

"Excellent," remarked Bin-lu. "Do you need to rest after the flight?"

"Do I smell another mission?" the fairy asked excitedly. "Fairies never tire!"

Bin-lu smiled and chuckled under his breath. "I need you to go to the locations of the two Doors near Barouk. I need a report on any Door usage since the armies came through. I also need to know how many people are present at each location. Can you do that?"

"Am I still here?" chirped the fairy as he leaped off Bin-lu's shoulder and hovered in the air, waiting to see if there were any further instructions.

Bin-lu waved dismissively and Shrimp shot upward, quickly disappearing into the dusk. A few minutes later, the Knights of Alcea entered the glade and Elandros came out of the woods to meet them. Bin-lu and Rut-ki dismounted.

"Has the enemy encamped yet?" asked Rut-ki.

"They have," answered Elandros, "and rather efficiently at that. They have taken the time to secure their campsite, if such a large gathering can even be considered a campsite. One doesn't realize the size of a twenty-thousand-man army until he sees it all gathered together in one place. Their camp encompasses a long stretch of the Barouk-Ongchi Road and the forest on both sides of it. It is huge."

"How have they secured it?" asked Bin-lu.

"It was an amazing operation to watch," explained Elandros. "The cavalry arrived first and set up a defensive perimeter. The first regiment of infantry began felling trees to create a clear zone for the bulk of the army. Other regiments joined in as they arrived. They then used those felled trees to build a crude barrier fence delineating the confines of the camp. It is clear to me that this army has had practice with this maneuver in the past. I would expect this to be a daily occurrence."

"So the army is disciplined and well organized?" asked Rut-ki.

“Very much so,” nodded Elandros. “I had a fairy record it, if you are interested in seeing it for yourself.”

“I would like to see it,” answered Bin-lu, “but it is valuable information for the other Alceans as well. We will need to send your fairy off to Tagaret to report on this.”

“There is time for both,” agreed the elf. “You can watch it and then send the fairy to the king. There are no other armies arriving until day three.”

“Then perhaps we should get started,” replied Bin-lu. “Rut-ki and I have more tasks on the agenda for this night. Maybe we can grab something to eat and watch the fairy at the same time.”

* * * *

The two command tents were set in the center of the campsite, directly on the Barouk-Ongchi Road. The smaller of the two was for General Gertz of Aerta, and the larger for the Team Leader, General Kolling of the Empire of Barouk. A third, much smaller, tent sat not far away from the other two. It was the temporary home of the black-cloak contingent assigned to the armies. Both Federation generals had dined together in the larger command tent and were now discussing their first day in enemy territory.

“We truly have taken them by surprise,” remarked General Kolling. “I expected a skirmish of some kind on our first day, but this land is rather barren of people. The few locals my men came across did not even possess horses. No word of our arrival will precede us to Ongchi.”

“If we can keep up the schedule,” complained General Gertz. “In a way, I wish the locals did have horses. I would gladly seize them to replace the useless mounts supplied to us.”

General Kolling frowned deeply. “I am also worried about that. When you first spoke of the quality of your horses, I took your comment as a petty complaint. I suspected that my men took the best for themselves. That is only human nature, but my own riders have been complaining as well. I suspect that the men General Tauman positioned here in Alcea have made themselves wealthy at the expense of the Federation. I am of half a mind to send some of the cavalry back to that farm to hang Tauman’s men, but it would solve nothing at this point.”

“It would not gain us new horses,” General Gertz agreed, “but rather than hang them, I would suggest dragging them here for our cavalry to handle as they see fit.”

“It would provide some entertainment for the troops,” chuckled General Kolling, “but I have to keep my mind focused on our objective. I will not waste the energy of our horses by sending anyone back to the farm unless it is necessary. Should I have need to send

another report to General Tauman, those treasonous men will pay for their greed."

* * * *

The unicorns glided through the evening sky and silently set down not far from the farm northwest of Barouk. Bin-lu glanced at Rut-ki and spoke softly.

"Let me do the talking, but have a couple of Lanoirian stars ready to fly."

"You do not think that they will surrender peacefully?" asked Rut-ki.

"Why should they?" Bin-lu replied. "If they can get rid of us, they can flee to Camp Destiny through the Door, and we certainly cannot allow that. Camp Destiny must not be alerted to our knowledge of the portals. When I halt near the farmhouse, I want you to ride a little further towards the barn. Do not let them reach the portal."

Rut-ki nodded silently and the two Knights of Alcea rode onward. A few minutes later, they approached the farmhouse. The door immediately opened and a man walked out onto the porch. Bin-lu waited anxiously for the second man to appear, but the door shut, and the lone farmer stood alone on the porch.

"We don't want any visitors," scowled the farmer. "We have no rooms to let, nor food to share. Turn around and be on your way."

Bin-lu halted not far from the porch, but Rut-ki continued towards the barn. The farmer noticed this with great alarm.

"Stop right there!" he shouted angrily. "I said that we don't want any visitors."

Bin-lu's eyes scanned the farmhouse and the grounds around it, seeking the location of the second farmer, but he saw no one other than the farmer on the porch.

"We are not looking for a place to stay," Bin-lu said calmly as he slid off his horse, "nor are we hungry. In fact, we have come to take a census for the governor. Lanoir will be instituting a tax in the near future, and we need to know the number of people living on this farm."

"What tax?" scowled the farmer. "I haven't heard anything about a tax. You two thieves get out of here right now, or we will tax your hearts with the steel of our blades."

Bin-lu knew at that moment that the other farmer was hidden somewhere, waiting to pounce upon them, but he still had no idea where. His body tensed like a coiled spring before he spoke.

"Actually," he said with a deceptively calm voice, "it is only a tax on members of the Federation. Where is your partner?"

The sound of a bowstring snapped, but Bin-lu had been half expecting it. He immediately dove to the ground and released one of

his stars at the farmer on the porch. The Lanoirian star struck the Zaran in the chest and the farmer fell down the stairs. Even though he had anticipated trouble and reacted quickly, the arrow still managed to slice open the skin of his shoulder.

Rut-ki reacted as soon as she heard the snap. The archer was above her, hiding in the loft of the barn. She was still sitting on her unicorn when the arrow was fired, but she leaped up and stood on the unicorn's back. The martial arts instructor quickly bent her knees and leaped upward again, hoping the hidden archer was not releasing another arrow at that very moment. As the loft opening came into view, Rut-ki's arm streaked out, sending a Lanoirian star flying from her hand. She heard a startled scream as her body reached the peak of her jump and began falling back towards the ground. One of her feet hit the back of the unicorn, but the other did not. The Knight of Alcea pushed off the unicorn and dropped the other Lanoirian star as she prepared to cushion her fall. As her body slammed into the ground, she was vaguely aware of Bin-lu running past her. Rut-ki rolled three times before jumping to her feet, just in case the archer was taking aim. She raced into the barn and started to climb a ladder to the loft, but Bin-lu's shout halted her.

"He's dead," called Bin-lu. "Nice throw. You got him in the face."

Rut-ki sighed with relief and dropped to the floor of the barn. Bin-lu joined her a moment later.

"This was sloppy," frowned Rut-ki. "We have been neglecting our practice, and it shows."

"There is little time for practice when every day brings true danger," retorted Bin-lu. "Let's get the Door and get out of here. We still have much to accomplish tonight."

Bin-lu searched for an ax and finally found one. He carried the ax to the magical Door, but he had no intention of destroying it. Using the ax, the Knight of Alcea separated the Door from the surrounding barn wall. He placed the Door face down on the floor in case anyone tried to open it.

"You are hurt," Rut-ki said as she noticed Bin-lu's bleeding shoulder.

"As you said," he smiled, "we haven't been practicing. I was too slow. In the future, we will not give these Snakes the benefit of the doubt. It is far easier to just kill them. They will never surrender anyway, and there is too much at stake for either of us to suffer a serious injury. Let's find some rope and then you can help me get this Door onto the unicorn."

The Knights of Alcea gathered all the rope they could find. They first tied rope around the Door itself and then carried the Door outside. Rut-ki held the Door while Bin-lu mounted the unicorn and

then they tied the Door to the unicorn.

"That will do fine," stated Bin-lu. "Go through their belongings in the house. See if you can find any Federation uniforms and then meet me at the cove we checked out last month. I will wait for you there."

"Why the uniforms?" asked Rut-ki. "We were supposed to get them off the bodies that the elves kill."

"I need a way to get into General Kolling's camp tonight," answered Bin-lu. "Now that we have seen the layout, I do not think I can sneak into it, and I do not expect them to alter the layout during the coming days. They appear to be very practiced in setting up camp."

"For the mages?" questioned Rut-ki. "We were not supposed to kill them until tomorrow night."

Bin-lu sighed. "I know that was our plan, but I think it is a mistake. They are going to realize tomorrow that they have not succeeded in arriving here unnoticed. Once that happens, they will be on high alert. Tonight is the only chance we will have of attacking while they are still somewhat lax."

"All right." Rut-ki nodded before turning away and running towards the farmhouse.

Bin-lu immediately mounted his unicorn and instructed him to head for the coast. The unicorn set down in an isolated cove where the beach was strewn with rocks instead of the fine sand typical of much of the area. While he waited for Rut-ki, Bin-lu untied the Door from the unicorn and set it down on the rocks. Using a thin knife he slowly drilled holes in the top and bottom of the Door. Next he created a rope basket and tied it to the bottom of the Door. He then tied a really long rope to the top of the Door and coiled the rest of the rope, securing it to his saddle. He then walked along the cove looking for an appropriate rock. He found one just as Rut-ki and her unicorn were landing.

"There were no uniforms," she reported. "Are you done?"

"As soon as I place this rock in the basket," answered Bin-lu. "Will you steady the Door while we take off?"

Rut-ki nodded and dismounted. She took the rock from Bin-lu and nodded towards his unicorn. Bin-lu mounted his unicorn while Rut-ki placed the rock into the rope basket and pulled it tight. She then raised the Door vertically and held it as Bin-lu and his unicorn rose slowly off the ground.

When the rope holding the Door became taut, Bin-lu signaled the unicorn. As they continued to rise, the Door lifted off the ground, followed by the dangling rope basket. The unicorn continued to rise and then banked towards the sea. Although the night was dark, the unicorn had no trouble finding one of the floats they had set in place

the previous month. While the unicorn hovered just over the surface, Bin-lu untied the rope from the saddle and lowered the Door into the water. When he came to the end of the rope, he tied it to the float and dropped it into the sea. When Bin-lu returned to the beach, he saw that Rut-ki had stretched all the ropes out on the ground.

"We have enough ropes for the second Door," she announced. "How did it go?"

"Except for getting wet from the float," chuckled Bin-lu, "it went as well as it could."

"Why are we going through all of this trouble?" asked Rut-ki. "With all that is going on, wouldn't it be easier to just destroy the Doors and give more attention to defeating the enemy?"

"It would be easier," Bin-lu replied, "but Doors are very valuable. We do not know how to make them. Storing them in the ocean is an excellent solution. The enemy cannot use it now, yet we can recover it after the war."

"Providing we win the war," frowned Rut-ki.

"Providing we win," agreed Bin-lu. "Let's go get the other Door. There is still much to do tonight."

* * * *

The unicorn flew back to shore and landed on the rocky beach. Bin-lu dismounted and stretched. Rut-ki sat nearby with three fairies dancing on her shoulder.

"How did it go?" asked Rut-ki

"It went well," answered Bin-lu. "What's with the fairies?"

"They are the fairies who were monitoring the Doors," replied Rut-ki. "The fourth is in Tagaret informing the king about the arrival of the Federation troops."

"I know that," Bin-lu chuckled with a shake of his head. "I meant what is up with their dancing?"

"They are happy," shrugged Rut-ki.

"Fairies do not like hiding in the dark day after day," chirped one of the fairies. "We are celebrating our freedom."

"And the successful completion of our mission," interjected another fairy.

"We are filled with joy," grinned the third.

Bin-lu smiled and sat down next to Rut-ki. "I am glad that someone is filled with joy." Bin-lu sighed wearily as he turned his attention to Rut-ki. "We still have not figured out a method to gain entry to the enemy's camp, and the night is slipping away from us."

"Postpone it until we can think of a way to accomplish it," advised Rut-ki.

"By morning the Federation troops will be leery and on full alert," Bin-lu said with a slight shake of his head. "Tonight is the best chance

we will have to take out the black-cloaks. We need to find a Federation uniform. Maybe we can wake up a tailor in Barouk and get him to make us something that will at least be passable."

"A tailor who has never even seen a Federation uniform?" balked Rut-ki. "That is not a viable plan. If you are intent on doing this tonight, we will have to take out one of their sentries. That is the only way that we will get a uniform."

"And alert the whole camp in the process," frowned Bin-lu. "I should have spent more time planning this part of the mission. Clint could have procured a uniform for me."

"We could put one of the soldiers to sleep," suggested one of the fairies as Shrimp climbed out of Bin-lu's pocket to see what all the commotion was about. "You could use the uniform to infiltrate their camp and then redress the soldier. They will think he just fell asleep on guard duty."

"Impractical," retorted Shrimp. "The sentry would be noticed missing before too much time passed. Even if he was not missed immediately, Bin-lu would surely be questioned when he walked in from the woods. Someone will mistake him for a sentry leaving his post."

Bin-lu nodded in agreement, but the enthusiasm of the joyous fairies was not dampened.

"Why do you want to be a soldier?" questioned one of the fairies.

"Ogre brain!" taunted one of the others. "He just said that he needed to enter the enemy's camp. He needs to kill the black-cloaks. Do you have seeds in your ears?"

"If he is not disguised," explained Shrimp, "he will be killed on sight."

"I know all that," retorted the inquisitive fairy, "but officers would be quick to question a soldier roaming around the camp at night. It is not a smart way to do it."

"And you have a better idea?" taunted one of the fairies.

"In fact, I do," countered the inquisitive fairy. "If he wants to roam freely around the camp, he should be a black-cloak. The soldiers would turn away from Bin-lu before they questioned him. He could go anywhere he wanted except maybe the tents of the generals."

"How do you know this?" asked Rut-ki.

"I have spent time in Zara," answered the fairy. "The soldiers do not like the black-cloaks. They always try to avoid them."

Bin-lu suddenly grinned and nodded enthusiastically. "That is an excellent idea. I can not only move freely around the camp, but no one will even question me for entering or leaving the mages' tent."

"And a simple black cloak should be easy to acquire," nodded Rut-ki. "We may have to wake up a shopkeeper in Barouk, but I am

sure that we could buy one there."

The inquisitive fairy puffed with pride as the other two fairies started to dance again and pretended not to notice. Bin-lu laughed and rose to his feet.

"I will go to Barouk and obtain the cloak," he stated. "Why don't you return to the elves and catch some sleep?"

* * * *

The unicorn glided silently just above the tops of the trees, like a dark shadow racing across the terrain. The cloaked figure upon the unicorn's back sat unmoving, his feet purposely taken out of the stirrups for a quick dismount. Below the canopy, two fairies darted from shadow to shadow, searching for an appropriate place for the attack to begin. Unexpectedly, one of the fairies shot up through the canopy. The other fairy halted the search and hovered in the darkness, his tiny eyes scanning the area for the nearest enemy solider. The attack was about to begin.

Shrimp offered no words of warning as he rose through the canopy and hovered over Bin-lu and the unicorn. He used his powers to levitate the Knight of Alcea off of the unicorn's back. The unicorn promptly banked to the right and silently glided away. Shrimp silently levitated Bin-lu through the canopy and into the darkness beside a large tree. As Bin-lu's feet touched the ground, Shrimp darted to his shoulder.

"This is as close as we dared to go," whispered the fairy. "There are soldiers between us and the tent, but Speck and I will keep watch over you."

"Where is the tent?" asked the Knight of Alcea.

"You are facing the proper direction," instructed the fairy. "You have three-hundred paces to go. The last one-hundred will be across open ground. Return here when you are done. Speck will summon the unicorn for your return trip to the glade."

Bin-lu nodded in understanding and adjusted his hood tighter to better conceal his face. Armed with only a small quiver hidden under his cloak, Bin-lu anxiously stepped away from the tree. His hand subconsciously reached through the rent in his cloak and touched the ends of the myric quills concealed there. He exhaled nervously and returned his attention to the path ahead. The first one-hundred paces were easy. None of the soldiers in the area were awake, and Bin-lu threaded his way through the maze of sleeping bodies.

Bin-lu saw the flames of the campfire before he saw the soldiers sitting around it. He altered his course slightly to take him farther away from the soldiers, but attention was still drawn to him. Of the six soldiers sitting around the campfire, only one of them took notice of the black-cloak roaming through the encampment. The soldier's

brow furrowed as his eyes followed the mage's path.

"Unlike them to be up and moving about," the soldier commented.

"Who?" asked one of the other soldiers as he turned and tried to see what his comrade was talking about.

Bin-lu had already passed out of sight, and the second soldier did not see him.

"The black-cloak," answered the first soldier. "They almost never leave their tent. I wonder what he is up to?"

"As long as he isn't coming this way," replied the second soldier, "he can go wherever he wants. But warn me if you see one coming this way."

Bin-lu was too far away to hear the words, but Speck heard them clearly. He memorized the face of the observant soldier and sped onward.

Bin-lu reached the edge of the Barouk-Ongchi Road and his step faltered. Unlike the darkness of the woods, the area of the large tents was dimly lit, torches scattered around the area so that anyone approaching the tents would be easily noticed. Sentries stood outside the two largest tents, but there were none stationed outside the mages' tent. That bothered Bin-lu. While it made his task somewhat easier, he wondered if the lack of sentries should be a warning to him. What if the tent was magically protected? What if the sentries were really there but hidden by an illusion?

Bin-lu berated himself as he felt doubts taking hold of him. It was too late to abort the mission. The black-cloaks had to die this night. He pushed his fears aside and resumed his slow march towards the mages' tent, his eyes scanning the dimly-lit area for anything he might have missed. As the Knight of Alcea reached the tent, his right hand extracted a myric quill. With his left hand, Bin-lu reached out to open the flap to the tent. He halted, fear rising within him.

Eight battle mages resided on the other side of the thin material. If the tent was alarmed, Bin-lu would not stand a chance of surviving the encounter. He suddenly wondered if he could escape if only he would turn around right now and flee. The Knight of Alcea twitched with alarm as he felt a touch on his shoulder.

"What are you waiting for?" scowled Shrimp. "You cannot remain undetected while standing here all night. Get it done."

This was not the first time that Bin-lu and Shrimp had been together inside an enemy camp. Their first mission together had been the penetration of Emperor Hanchi's massive army in Sordoa. Both of them had nearly died that night, but they had prevailed because they had learned to trust one another. Bin-lu swallowed hard and nodded. Bin-lu tossed the fairy off his shoulder with a quick shrug. He reached

out and pulled the flap aside.

Bin-lu walked through the opening and entered the tent. He found a black-cloak standing inside the opening, staring at him with confusion. Bin-lu reached out with his right hand and shoved the myric quill into the mage. The black-cloak crumbled to the ground wordlessly. Instantly, the fear pressing down on Bin-lu vanished, like a torch being lit in the darkest of caverns. Suddenly, the Knight of Alcea understood everything. He reached for a handful of quills and quickly assassinated all of the sleeping black-cloaks. He retrieved the used quills, tied them together with a strip of cloth and shoved them back into his hidden quiver. With a feeling of confidence, the Knight of Alcea stepped out of the tent and made his way back to the rendezvous point.

Chapter 11

Day Two

Pandemonium reigned throughout the campsite of Team Barouk. Word spread quickly about the deaths of the black-cloaks and the deaths of fifty horses. General Kolling had immediately ordered all regiments to form up in formation and a head count was taken of the troops. No one was unaccounted for, but the orders to break camp were still forthcoming. The troops, rather than wait idly for the generals to issue orders, had taken it upon themselves to patrol the perimeter of the camp. While the soldiers all feared the black-cloaks, the deaths of the mages were taken as a bad omen. Inside the large command tent, the generals discussed the situation.

"I know that the horses were poor stock," scowled General Kolling, "but horses just don't up and die overnight like that. Our camp was infiltrated last night."

"Perhaps it is bad water," suggested General Gertz. "There was no sign of a struggle in the mages' tent, no sign of forced entry."

"And only the mages were effected?" balked General Kolling. "That is preposterous."

"And the fifty horses," General Gertz offered meekly. "Or maybe some of the horses were diseased, and somehow it spread to the mages. The sentries reported nothing unusual during the night. These Alceans are not ghosts who can come and go as they please."

"So you say," snapped General Kolling. "I am not a superstitious man. I do not believe in ghosts, or coincidences, but I recognize an attack when I see one. Someone or something killed those mages last night."

The tent flap opened and Colonel Ednor stepped into the tent. General Kolling looked up with annoyance.

"What is it, Colonel?"

"The mages were poisoned," the colonel reported. "So were the horses."

General Kolling's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Have the remaining horses been checked?"

"I am having that done as we speak. I am not sure of the extent of the poisoning, but more horses will surely die today. Some of the other horses checked are already showing signs of distress."

"What can be done for them?" asked General Kolling.

“Not much, sir. The best thing we can do is get them some more feed and water. I would not trust what is left here. I suggest we start moving to our next cache immediately.”

General Kolling sighed and nodded. “See to it, Colonel.”

Colonel Ednor saluted and left the tent.

“Poisoned?” frowned General Gertz. “Why sneak into camp and poison just the horses and the mages? Why not poison all of the men, too?”

“Perhaps because the poisoner did not sneak into the camp,” posed General Kolling. “If the scoundrel is one of our own men, he would not want to poison his own food. The mages always ate separately from their own supply, but the rest of the food was distributed as the quartermaster deemed necessary. An individual soldier could never be sure what portion of the cache he might end up with.”

“So you think the poisonings were done by one of our own men?” asked General Gertz.

“I am not sure what to think,” sighed General Kolling. “I know that there is little love for the Federation within any of our armies. Kyrga was always more concerned with the number of troops we had than the quality of troops. As a result, we have ended up with many malcontents among our ranks. Still, I fail to see why any malcontent would choose this particular time to strike. To take away our mages means that our wounded on the battlefield will have no healers.”

“Unless they are hoping to avoid battle entirely,” posed General Gertz. “We should watch for desertions.”

“It would be foolish to desert in a country that you know will be conquered,” replied General Kolling. “Sooner or later the perpetrators would have to come under our control again, and deserters would be handled ruthlessly. None of it makes any sense.”

“Unless it actually was Alceans.”

“I will not speculate,” General Kolling said with an air of finality. “Let’s get these armies on the road. We cannot afford to fall behind schedule.”

* * * *

Bin-lu woke with the sun shining in his face. It was already well into the sky. He sat up and stretched as he looked around. There were very few elves left, but he saw Elandros sitting and talking to Rut-ki. He walked over to them and sat down.

“You let me sleep a long time,” greeted Bin-lu. “Where are the others?”

“You needed the sleep,” smiled Elandros. “The others are keeping watch on the enemy’s progress and the road behind them in case they think of returning to Barouk to get replacement horses.”

“That is not necessary,” said Bin-lu. “I have ordered the Barouk city guard to keep a watch for any returning Federation soldiers. They will be killed before they can report the absence of the Doors.”

“A wise move,” Elandros responded while signaling one of the remaining elves to carry Bin-lu’s words to the elves watching the enemy’s rear. “That will free up some of my men and make the task less arduous. You caused quite a commotion last night. The Federation is not happy.”

Bin-lu smiled with satisfaction. “How are they doing now?”

“They are well behind schedule,” the elf reported, “and the generals are in foul moods. The column is constantly halting as horses drop dead in the road, and soldiers have to detour around the carcasses. They have lost half of their horses already. The other half will probably die before high sun.”

“Any foraging yet?”

“Not yet,” answered Elandros. “The generals opted not to send riders forward to check out the next cache. I think they were afraid of making the horses move any faster than a walk. They will be surprised to find the rest of their caches empty.”

“Surprised and more than a little bit concerned,” interjected Rut-ki. “Those men have a long walk to Ongchi, and after tonight, they will know that the enemy is constantly watching them.”

“Then our work here is done, Rut-ki,” stated Bin-lu. “We need to prepare for the other two teams coming to Lanoir.”

“We can leave after we make our report to King Arik,” replied Rut-ki. “Elandros and I were just instructing Speck as to the message we want delivered, but I wanted to ask you about last night before the fairy left. You mentioned something about the protection of fear before you fell asleep. What did you mean?”

“I was afraid to enter the mages’ tent,” frowned Bin-lu as he woke up Shrimp. “I have never felt such fear before. I froze. I was afraid to enter the tent, and I was afraid to flee. Had it not been for Shrimp, I might still be standing there. Did you not feel it, Shrimp?”

“Fairies are fearless,” boasted the tiny green man.

Bin-lu turned his head and stared at the fairy. “We both know that that is not true, Shrimp. Did you feel fearful last night?”

“No,” the fairy conceded softly. He knew that Bin-lu was talking about their first mission, but he hoped that the Knight of Alcea would not talk about it in front of others. “I do not know what you are talking about.”

“Interesting,” mused Bin-lu. “I wondered why there were not sentries outside the mages’ tent. I originally thought the tent might be protected by a magical spell, and I was afraid to touch it. Indeed, it was protected by a spell, but not in the sense I had anticipated. There

was a black-cloak standing inside the tent, and he was creating an aura of fear around the tent. That was their protection, and it also explained the lack of sentries. The sentries would be exposed to the spell and be incapacitated by the fear, so they would be useless."

"How do you know it was a spell of fear?" asked Elandros.

"Shrimp drove me into action," explained the Knight of Alcea. "I was still petrified, but his lack of fear encouraged me enough to proceed with the mission. I entered the tent and immediately killed the black-cloak who was awake. The feeling of fear instantly evaporated. I knew then that the fear was induced by magic. I wonder why the fairies are not affected?"

"That is a question that only a mage can answer," stated Rut-ki. "Speck, you will ask that question in Tagaret when you make your report. If all of the black-cloaks are using this spell, it will have a great effect on other Knights. We might need a magical way to counteract it."

* * * *

Wylan dismounted Wesik in front of the Rider's Rest Inn in Caldar. The Knight of Alcea noticed that Sheri's unicorn was already standing outside the inn, so he did not bother to tether his own unicorn. He gently ran his hand over Wesik and sighed. He stretched briefly and then mounted the stairs to the inn, still using his staff as a cane, although there was no one around to notice his act. He entered the common room and found it empty except for his wife.

"You finished before me," smiled Wylan. "Did you find anyone left in the city?"

"Not a single person," answered Sheri. "You?"

"I did find a couple of old people who refused to leave, but they are gone now. I explained to them that it was not just their own lives that mattered, but the lives of countless others. They grudgingly agreed to leave the city."

Sheri filled a mug with ale and set it on a table for Wylan. She set her own mug of ale down next to his and sat down. Wylan promptly joined her at the table.

"It is a strange feeling sitting here calmly in an empty city knowing that tomorrow the streets will be filled with enemy soldiers. This is the inn that they will be coming through, isn't it?"

Sheri nodded. "That is why I chose it for our rendezvous. I wanted to get a good look at it before we left the city. This is the day we have dreaded for so long. It is hard to believe that it has finally arrived."

Wylan frowned and nodded. "We could have stayed in Zara. I am sure that Alex would have found something for me to do, and I bet Zack would have liked to have Lady Zachary around for a while

longer."

"Lady Zachary has played her part," Sheri replied. "She will never be seen again. There is no reason for her to continue to exist. As far as anyone is concerned, she has returned to Vinafor to ready her darling daughter for the upcoming marriage. My part there was over. Besides, I really missed Sinora. I hadn't realized how close I had grown to that unicorn, but after you, she is the closest living thing to my heart. She is a part of me now."

"I understand," Wylan agreed. "It was like a grand reunion when I met with Wesik again. We weren't gone that long, yet it felt as if I had been gone for ages. I am sure that Wesik felt the same. I could see it in his eyes."

"They are amazing creatures," remarked Sheri.

Wylan merely nodded, and the two Knights of Alcea sat quietly for a while sipping their ale. Eventually, Wylan sighed anxiously.

"Tomorrow is the long-awaited day," he said. "I suppose we should prepare to leave the city."

The sound of creaking wood from the stairs alerted the Knights of Alcea. Wylan griped his staff and calmly rose to his feet. Sheri also rose, her hand moving towards the hilt of her sword, but she kept the bulk of Wylan between her and the stairs to avoid being seen. A man walked down the stairs and stared at them.

"And what is so important about tomorrow?" the stranger asked, his posture rigid as if in anticipation of a fight. "It must be something terrible to force you from the city."

Sheri immediately moved her hand away from her hilt and slid around her husband. Her lips spread in a warm, welcoming smile.

"I didn't think anyone was left in the rooms," Sheri said in a friendly manner. "I apologize for that. The city fathers are holding a giant festival to the north of the city. The whole city is already there. Even visitors are welcome. Would you like to join Wylan and me? We were just getting ready to go."

"A festival?" frowned the stranger. "What for?"

"Springtime," Sheri said cheerily. "We always hold a springtime festival, but it is usually held within the city. This year is different. Last fall, many of the citizens were hired for projects elsewhere in Alcea, and they are returning with much gold in their pockets. This year's festival will be so large that there was no place within the city to hold all of the people. It will be a grand affair never forgotten. Everyone will be there. Say you will come."

The stranger appeared to relax. He shook his head, declining the invitation. "I have no time for festivals. I think I will just walk around the city a bit and then I must get some sleep. I have an early day of travel tomorrow."

“That’s a pity,” sighed Sheri, “but I understand. Wylan and I will not be here when you get back, so just help yourself to whatever is in the kitchen.”

The man nodded and strode out the door. Wylan sighed slowly, letting the pent-up anxiety flow out of him.

“That was too close,” he said softly. “Was that who I think it was?”

“Undoubtedly,” answered Sheri. “I checked every room before you arrived. Someone must have demanded a last minute check be preformed before the invasion. It is time for us to move on.”

The Knights of Alcea left their ale on the table and walked out the door. The stranger was still visible several blocks away. He appeared to be strolling aimlessly, and the Knights mounted their unicorns.

“I thought all of the Doors were guarded by fairies?” asked Wylan. “Why didn’t they warn us of his arrival?”

“And how would they know that we were there?” asked Sheri. “They are monitoring the Doors, not the common room. No doubt one of them is carrying word to Tagaret as we speak. Where is Twerp?”

“I sent him to Tagaret earlier today,” answered Wylan. “Although there was not anything to report, I wanted him to see if there was any news from the other Knights. He will be back soon. I will have him direct the Door fairies to report any usage directly to us.”

Sheri nodded and turned her unicorn towards the northern gates. “We had better use the northern exit from the city just in case the stranger sees us.”

Before they had gone a single block, Twerp glided down out of the sky and landed on Wylan’s shoulder.

“What is the news?” asked Wylan.

“Not much,” answered the fairy. “There was a late winter storm in Cordonia, and that is making it hard to get the Cordonian army into Targa, but there is not much else to report.”

“Nothing from Lanoir?” frowned Sheri. “Was Bin-lu able to neutralize the black-cloaks down there?”

“They haven’t heard yet. They had expected a report last night or this morning, but it had not arrived by the time I left Tagaret.”

“Bin-lu is capable,” stated Wylan. “He will succeed. Twerp, we are going for a ride north of the city to allow the enemy to enter the city. I want you to tell the fairies watching the Doors to report directly to Sheri and me before going on to Tagaret. We just had a Federation soldier walk through unexpectedly.”

“As you command,” saluted the tiny green man.

* * * *

The six Federation soldiers moved quietly through the woods of Lanoir. They were confident about bagging some game as they were

excellent archers, and they moved with a stealth that most soldiers would envy. The well-coordinated group used hand signals to communicate, although they did not communicate much as the light of day was fading. A sudden rustling of the leaves caught their attention, and the leader of the group signaled for silence. Each man immediately halted and pivoted towards the distant sound, arrow nocked and ready for a deer to come bounding through the trees. What happened next was totally unexpected.

Bowstrings sang out from every direction, and four of the soldiers crumbled to the ground. The two remaining soldiers immediately dropped to the ground, their survival instincts demanding that they seek cover. For a moment, silence claimed the forest. Not a creature stirred. No birds chirped. Nothing made a sound. When the final bowstring snapped, the sound was like a clap of thunder on a clear night. The death gurgle of one of the two remaining soldiers sounded abnormally loud and lengthy. The sixth and final member of the team shivered with fear. He wanted to rise and flee the woods, but he could not move, his fear paralyzing him in place. He tried to remain invisible in the night, breathing shallowly even though his lungs ached for a gulp of air. Time slowed, seemingly stopping all together, as he waited for something to happen. Eventually sounds began to return to the forest. Night birds sang once again, and squirrels scurried up and down the trees. Whatever wraiths had inhabited the forest and shot arrows into his friends, they were gone.

The soldier gulped air greedily and slowly rose to his knees. The forest was darker than when they had entered it. He could not see the bodies of the first four men struck down, but he could see the last, and the arrow sticking out of his forehead. A tremor of revulsion rippled through the soldier and he turned and ran towards the camp.

* * * *

General Kolling was irritable. His legs were tired from walking, and he felt filthy. Road dust and sweat had turned his hair into a dense, tangled mat, and had made his uniform unbearable. He gritted his teeth as he felt the grime under his uniform clogging his pores and irritating his skin. He longed for a bath and headed straight towards the large tent that he could see in the distance. So he was more than a little upset when Colonel Ednor stepped in between him and the tent.

“We have problems, General,” stated the colonel.

“Tell me something I don’t already know, Colonel,” snapped the general. “I am already four hours late arriving in camp because there is not a single horse left alive in this entire army. I want a bath drawn immediately, and I want a meal served while I soak off this grime.” The colonel’s mouth opened to speak, but the general was not done. “And tell me why I did not have to pass any fortifications on my way

into camp. This is only our second day in this country and already I am seeing laxness that I absolutely will not stand for."

"There is no food," the colonel blurted out.

The general stood staring at the colonel with a confused look. It took a few moments for the words to sink in.

"No food? What are you talking about?"

"The cache was empty," stated the general. "There was not a lick of food left. It is all gone."

"How is that possible? The first day's cache was as it was supposed to be."

"I do not know how it happened," admitted the colonel, "but it was discovered when the first regiment arrived."

"Send out foragers immediately," ordered the general. "I will not have my army starve to death."

"That is exactly what I did," the colonel responded. "That is why the fortifications were ignored. I felt that obtaining food was a higher priority."

"You do not send an entire regiment out to forage," berated the general. "While I agree with your priorities, you have enough men to do both."

"If it was simply foraging, I would agree," frowned the colonel. "The foragers are being killed."

"Killed? Who is killing my men?"

"We do not know," the colonel said softly as some soldiers walked by. "I started by sending out teams of six men, figuring that the rest of the men could start on the fortifications. It didn't take long to realize that we had a major problem. Each team of six men was attacked by unseen foes. In each and every case, one man returned alive, not a scratch on him. All of the survivors speak of an eerie attack, arrows flying from invisible archers. Not a single man will admit to having seen the enemy."

"Preposterous," scowled the general. "How can experienced hunters go into the woods and be killed without even a scent of the enemy. I don't believe it."

"I do not have an answer to that question, General," conceded the colonel, "but I improvised as best I could. I started sending out whole squads. The men were not attacked, but neither did they come back with any game. Twenty men marching through the woods is not the way to hunt if you are depending on quickly caught game."

General Kolling stood staring at the trees for a long time. Colonel Ednor remained silent, knowing that the general was formulating a response. Eventually the general sighed wearily and spoke with exasperation in his voice.

"Order my bath drawn, Colonel, and tell General Gertz to join me

as soon as he arrives in camp. Pull all of the men out of the forest and put them to work on the fortifications. I want a double guard this evening, and no one is allowed to leave the encampment without express permission from me."

"If I pull the hunting parties," frowned the colonel, "the men will have nothing to eat tonight."

"The men will go hungry this night," declared the general, "but I will not risk being attacked without our fortifications built. In the daylight tomorrow, men will be assigned to forage as we march towards Ongchi. Then we shall see exactly who our enemy is. Once we have determined that, we will annihilate them."

The colonel saluted and retreated. General Kolling walked to his tent and sank into a chair. He pulled his boots off as men brought buckets of water for his bath. A few moments later, General Gertz entered the tents and slumped into another chair.

"This is a ghastly land," complained General Gertz. "I think we need to find a village or a farm and commandeer some horses. I cannot walk all the way to Ongchi."

"Walking to Ongchi is the least of our problems," stated General Kolling. "The Alceans know that we are here."

"Are you sure?"

"I am positive. At first I suspected some of our own men for the poisonings last night, but I no longer think that way. They struck at the mages because they needed the mages dead more than us. They fear our magic, but now they do not have to worry about it."

"And the horses?" questioned General Gertz.

"To slow us down," answered General Kolling. "I am pretty sure that we have seen the last cache of food that we are going to see for this journey, and the enemy is sniping at our foragers."

"Merely sniping at our foragers means that they are not strong enough to fight us directly," General Gertz pointed out. "Do you think they are slowing us down until they can raise a force large enough to confront us?"

"I think that is exactly what they are doing."

"But they will be decimated from behind when the other two prongs arrive at Ongchi," frowned General Gertz. "By drawing all of their armies together to confront us, they are actually making our task easier."

"You are correct in the grand scheme of things, but that does little to alleviate the pain our armies will have to endure. We need to keep our armies on schedule and not let the snipers slow us down. The closer we are to Ongchi when the thirteen days expire, the better our survival rate is likely to be."

"Then we will push on," stated General Gertz. "These Alceans will

soon learn that the Federation cannot be defeated. I predict that they will break and run when we finally do confront them." General Kolling did not respond and General Gertz looked at him questioningly. "What is it that you are not saying?" he finally asked.

"It bothers me that the enemy discovered us on the first day," frowned General Kolling. "In fact, the poisoning of our horses and the assassination of our mages leads me to believe that they were waiting for us to arrive. How could the Alceans possibly know that any Federation army would be arriving in the city of Barouk?"

"We only learned of our destination a few months ago," agreed General Gertz. "That would barely leave enough time for a ship to cover such a large distance."

"There has not been enough time for a ship to arrive here," corrected General Kolling. "Either the Alceans have infiltrated General Tauman's army, or the Alceans have capabilities that we are unaware of. Neither possibility bodes well for the other teams coming to Alcea."

"General Tauman needs to be made aware of this," General Gertz said in alarm. "We must send someone back to the portals."

Chapter 12

Day Three

Just south of the Sordoan city of Caldar, two huge armies approached each other. General Omirro's 10th Corps from Ertak and General Barbone's 22nd Corps from Spino met at the rendezvous point assigned to them, and General Omirro took command of Team Caldar. Two regiments of infantry from the 22nd Corps had entered Caldar with General Omirro's men while two regiments of cavalry from the 10th Corps had used the portal that had opened to a farm so that they could more easily carry their saddles. The four regiments switched places, rejoining their own armies.

"That worked out well enough," stated General Barbone. "Any problems on your end?"

"None," answered General Omirro. "The city was deserted. Seems the Alceans are celebrating the coming of spring with a festival. I do not think they will be celebrating much longer."

General Omirro turned and gave Colonel Verle the signal to start the march towards Trekum while the two generals moved to the side of the road to continue their chat. Two thousand mounted soldiers formed up and started moving along the Coastal Highway towards the capital city of Sordoa. The infantry regiments found comfortable spots at the side of the road to rest until it came time for them to join the column.

"Some of that horseflesh looks rather poor," frowned General Omirro. "Don't the Alceans feed their horses? I understood that Sordoa had the finest horses in Alcea. If these are their finest, this land is not worth conquering."

"It was worse than you think," General Barbone replied. "I wanted to reject all of the horses that were waiting for us. They were so bad that I did not think that some of them would survive the journey to Trekum. I personally went back through the portal and complained to General Tauman. I managed to squeeze one-thousand horses out of him that he was saving for other teams."

"You couldn't get them all replaced?" frowned General Omirro.

"No," sighed General Barbone. "I had to fight for what we got. Tauman was complaining that the change in plans would cause him severe problems."

"I really don't care about Tauman's problems," scowled General Omirro. "I have two armies that require useable mounts. Perhaps I

should go back and talk to him myself."

"It won't do any good," replied General Barbone. "He just doesn't have the horses to give us. He was shouting at his own officers to get out and find some more horses to replace what he was giving me. Believe me, if he was open to giving us more, I would have gotten them. You know how stubborn I can be."

"I do know that," laughed General Omirro. "All right, we will deal with what we have, but if we run across any horses on the way to Trekum, we will pause long enough to take them. Were there any other problems?"

"Just the two farmers who were supposed to procure the horses for us," General Barbone smiled oddly, "but they are problems no longer. My men left them hanging from the barn."

General Omirro raised an eyebrow. "You think they sold us out to the Alceans?"

"No." General Barbone shook his head. "I think they lined their purses with Federation gold. Colonel Pineta said that he saw many fine Sordoan horses when he was here in the fall. It is clear to me that the farmers bought inferior horses and charged the Federation for prize stock. I was in no mood to let them get away with it."

"Tauman will be upset," warned General Omirro. "He is not a man to cross so casually."

"The next time we see General Tauman," shrugged General Barbone, "the war in Alcea will be over. He has no reason to send anyone else through the portal, and I certainly don't plan to use it again. By that time, it will be forgotten, assuming he even learns of their deaths. I am not concerned."

The last of the Ertakan cavalry left the site, and the infantry rose to follow. General Omirro mounted his horse and looked down at General Barbone.

"We will talk more tonight. Put your mounted regiments at the rear of the column. I want them ready to repel anything that comes up behind us."

On top of a nearby wooded hill, two Knights of Alcea stood watching the departing armies.

"It is quite a sight," commented Sheri. "That group down there is three times the size of the whole Targa Army."

"Governor Mobami has almost as many men," countered Wylan.

"True," retorted Sheri, "but this is only one leg of the attack against Trekum. There are two more just like it coming up from the south."

Wylan did not respond and Sheri gazed at him with concern. "What is the matter, Wylan? We both know the armies coming against us are huge. Why are you downplaying them?"

Wylan sighed and walked away from the ridge. Sheri followed him, and he turned and looked into her eyes.

"I don't know," he said softly. "I guess I find the odds against us rather overwhelming. You stand there marveling at the size of those massive armies down in the valley, and all I can think about is that we have to penetrate their camp tonight."

"And you don't want to?" questioned Sheri.

"Want to?" Wylan replied as if the question was absurd. "Of course, I don't want to. What I want to do is spend the rest of my life with you, raising a family and taking care of our children. Only a fool would be desirous of sneaking into an enemy encampment and killing some battle mages."

"It has to be done, Wylan," frowned Sheri, "but you don't have to do it, and I don't want you doing it to please me. I will go in alone."

"You will not," Wylan replied adamantly. "I said that I did not look forward to the task. I did not say that I would walk away from it. I know the difference between desires and obligations. As Knights of Alcea, our duty is to sneak in there and kill those mages, and I will not falter from my duty. I just wish this killing would stop some day. That is all I am saying. We deserve a life together."

Sheri smiled at Wylan and kissed him. "We will have a grand life together soon. In two weeks this war will be over. There will be no one left to stir up trouble. We can return to Southland and start a family. We can even resign from the Knights of Alcea if you want."

Wylan sighed deeply. "That is not what I want. I am proud to be a Knight of Alcea, and even prouder that you are also one. I have always lived to serve my country, and King Arik is exactly the type of leader I dreamed about serving. I guess I just get angry when people like those in the valley back there feel it is their duty to come half way across the world to disturb the peace that King Arik brought to Alcea. Why didn't they just stay home and kill each other instead of bothering us?"

Sheri could find no answer to her husband's question. In a way, she was just as angry. She had seen the pettiness and greed up close when she was portraying Lady Zachary, and it appalled her. As much as she yearned to free the people of Zara from their lousy rulers, her desire for peace in Alcea was even greater. She nodded understandingly and playfully tugged on Wylan's sleeve.

"Let's go dismantle those Doors and sink them in the sea. Maybe that will cheer us up a bit."

Wylan smiled weakly and nodded in agreement.

* * * *

General Nunes stood and stared through the open Door at Camp Destiny. The only thing visible to him was an unlit fireplace in what

appeared to be a rather small home. The first regiment of the 19th Corps from Spino had already passed through the portal to Cordonia, but the General and the rest of the army would wait for the colonel to report that the staging area was secure. The report took longer than expected, but the colonel eventually signaled for the general to step through the portal, and General Nunes wasted no time in doing so. He stepped into the small house and immediately stepped aside to let the soldiers behind him flow through unimpeded.

"What was the holdup, Colonel?" asked General Nunes.

"It is quite foggy outside, General. We can't even see the city of Paso across the river. As the visibility is so low, I needed to alter the orders slightly. I have more men on the defensive perimeter than the plan called for, but I wanted each man to be seen by two others. The camp would not be truly secure otherwise."

"Well done, Colonel," complimented the general. "Your response to the situation was the proper one. Has there been any contact with the Alceans?"

"None, General. This side of the river is not very populated. General Butwin has the busy side of the river, but even he will probably not encounter anyone. The farm he is coming out at is a league away from the city. On a clear day his army might be seen from Paso, but he will have no worries today."

"Excellent," smiled General Nunes. "I ordered the cavalry to come through last after seeing this house through the portal. Those horses will end up destroying the floors of this house before the whole army is through, so change your formation plans accordingly."

"That will not cause me a problem, General. One of my men did report that the Black River is still frozen. As the bridge across the river is still three days away, I thought I would get your feeling about trying to cross over the ice. It makes me nervous to have our army separated from the 27th Corps."

"I will not trust my men to the whims of ice," the general replied with a shake of his head. "Right now we have ten-thousand men on each side of the river. Either army is capable of defeating the entire Cordonian army on its own. Should half of my army get across the river before the ice cracks, I could end up with a smaller army than the Cordonians. I understand the odds of such an occurrence are low, but there is no reason to take such a risk, no matter how small it is. Crossing the river in three days will be fine."

* * * *

General Testa of the 20th Corps of Spino walked through the portal and into a temple south of the Cordonian city of Carid. He could hear the wind howling outside the temple, and the temperature inside the old building told him that winter had not yet let go of its

hold on Cordonia.

"There is fresh snow outside, General," reported a colonel. "Another week before the invasion would have been better."

"Better but not necessary," General Testa replied. "We have more than enough men to easily overwhelm the Cordonians. We have the easiest task of the entire war. The Cordonians only have six-thousand men in what they call an army. I don't think a little snow is going to change the obvious results of the coming battle. Kantor will fall without a whimper."

"Yes, sir," replied the colonel. "General Alden and the 28th Corps will be a while getting here. You might as well wait inside the temple and stay out of the weather. I will notify you when the Aertans come into view."

"General Alden," chuckled General Testa. "This is probably the only time I will have authority over the Crown Prince of Aerta. I bet he is none too pleased to be under the command of a Spinoan general."

"Why is he even here?" the colonel asked cautiously. "I would have thought that he would be in charge of the home guard and not leading an army into battle."

"Alden and his father do not get along," smirked General Testa. "If King Anator had pushed for it, I am quite sure that Grand General Kyrga would have made Alden the top general in Force Cordonia, but now he is at the bottom. Obviously his father does not favor him very highly. At least Montero got his choice of posting in Sordoa."

"He doesn't get along with his father either, does he?"

"Absolutely not," laughed General Testa. "They hate each other. King Harowin probably hopes that Montero doesn't return from the war, but Montero had enough pull on his own to get what he wants."

* * * *

Sinora and Wesik halted in a small clearing of the Sordoan forest. Wylan and Sheri slid from the backs of the unicorns, and Sheri immediately started rummaging through her pack. Twerp stuck his head out of Wylan's pocket and sensed excitement in the air. The fairy leaped to Sinora's head and stood watching the Knights of Alcea. Sheri pulled two Federation uniforms out of her pack and handed the larger one to Wylan. She then bound her chest tightly and pulled the uniform on. Wylan examined his uniform before putting it on.

"This even has the patch of the 10th Corps," he remarked. "How could you have planned this so well?"

"I was Lady Zachary," grinned Sheri. "Zack Nolan has an incredible grasp of the situation. When he learned that we would be assigned to Caldar, he made a point of procuring the proper patches for us to use. He then had uniforms made up for us. Mine fits

perfectly, but he had to guess about your size. How does it fit?"

"Well enough," Wylan replied, "but the sleeves are a bit long. It will be fine for riding, but not for marching when my arms are at my sides."

"Then remain mounted," stated Sheri. "Your excellent night vision will be useful to see if anyone is coming when I approach the mages tent. Should anyone approach, you can head them off until after I have dispatched the mages."

Wylan frowned deeply as he removed the colorful patches that shielded his eyes. "I should be going into the tent, not you."

"Nonsense," retorted Sheri. "I can stab sleeping bodies with myric quills as easily as you can. The real danger will be getting out of the encampment when we are done. It will be particularly dangerous when it comes time to leave the tent. Your night vision is akin to a dwarf's. I want those eyes of yours outside the tent to avoid being discovered by the enemy when I exit."

Wylan sighed anxiously and did not respond to his wife's words. Part of him wanted to demand that he be the one to enter the tent, but the other part of him realized that Sheri was right. She was more than capable of killing the mages, and it did make sense for him to keep watch.

"Twerp," ordered Sheri, "it is time to find us a way into the encampment. Do not dally."

"Dally?" quipped the fairy. "I will be back before either of you realizes how foolish you look in those uniforms."

Sheri giggled as the little green man leaped off the head of the unicorn and shot into the dark sky. Even Wylan smiled inwardly as he momentarily cast off the dark gloom that had found a home in his heart. Wylan strapped his staff to Wesik and then he walked over to Sheri and wordlessly embraced her. For a long time they stood silently embracing each other. Eventually, Sheri pushed away and kissed Wylan tenderly.

"Now is not the time for such feelings, husband. We must keep our minds on the task at hand."

Twerp chose that very moment to drop from the sky and land on Wylan's shoulder.

"I have the perfect spot," the fairy reported excitedly, but we must move quickly. A patrol passes through the area, and it has just gone by."

Both Knights of Alcea responded without hesitation. They mounted their unicorns and took to the air. Twerp hung onto Wylan's ear and directed him towards the chosen spot. The unicorns glided noiselessly through the canopy and landed lightly in a small clearing almost completely enclosed by thorny bushes. Wesik stepped

cautiously as he maneuvered the narrow trail leading out of the clearing, and Sinora followed closely.

Their entry into the encampment had been far from the center, and their journey through the camp took them past many burned out campfires. While most of the Federation soldiers were fast asleep, there were still many up and about. Some sat talking quietly and others moved about. Several of them glanced at the two mounted soldiers with curiosity, but no one challenged them. Eventually they came to an area of the encampment that was dimly lit. Wylan glanced at the three large tents and felt a shiver race up his spine. They were clearly in the center of the enemy's encampment and twenty-thousand soldiers surrounded them. He swallowed hard as he brought the unicorns to a halt in the relative darkness of a large tree on the edge of the big clearing.

Sheri slid off her unicorn without hesitation. She walked Sinora away from the large clearing so that Wylan would not be seen as having two horses. She tied the unicorn to a tree and then calmly pulled a small quiver out of her pack and strapped it on at her waist. She walked back to where Wylan and Wesik waited. With a glance around the open area, she marched towards the smallest of the three large tents. Before she had covered half the distance to the tent, a lone black-cloak emerged from the tent. Sheri smoothly altered her course so that she appeared to be merely passing by the tent. She continued on for a while and then gradually moved into the trees and doubled back towards Wylan and the Wesik. Eventually, she returned to where she had started.

"That was unexpected," she said softly. "I guess they are not all sleeping. Where did he go?"

"He didn't go anywhere," Wylan replied. "He stood outside the tent for a while and then disappeared back inside. Perhaps this is not a wise idea."

"Have courage, my husband," Sheri smiled. "We can do this."

"I know we can," frowned Wylan, "but I have a strange foreboding about this mission. Let's call it off. We can figure out another way to slay the mages."

"Time is short," retorted Sheri, "and we have no mage of our own to fall back on. We are already here. Let's get it done."

Without waiting for a response, Sheri once more set off on a path towards the mage tent. Wylan watched her go, marveling at the incredible amount of courage his wife had. In a way, he envied her.

Sheri marched up to the tent and grabbed a myric quill in her right hand. Her left hand reached for the tent flap, but her fingers never touched the fabric. In an instant, her confidence shattered and her body froze. She stared uncomprehendingly at her hand and saw

her fingers trembling with fear. Her whole body shook with a feeling she had never experienced before. Her body quivered and she sweated sheets of perspiration. Her lungs shrunk, and she felt as if she could not inhale enough air to sustain her body. She gasped and began to pant loudly.

Suddenly, the tent flap flew open and a black-cloak stood before the Knight of Alcea. Sheri watched helplessly as the dark mage reached out and placed his hand on Sheri's shoulder. A jolt of searing pain shot through Sheri, and she felt her limbs turn to jelly, her body collapsing under its own weight. Her eyes rolled up into her head and everything turned black.

Across the clearing, Wylan watched the horror unfold. He kicked Wesik into motion even though he could not save his wife. With a feeling of revenge, Wylan and Wesik charged the mage tent.

"Show your horn, Wesik. You will need it to help me avenge my Sheri."

The unicorn did not respond, but tears flowed from his eyes as swiftly as those from Wylan's eyes. Wylan pulled his staff from its restraining strap and glared at the black-cloak bending over Sheri's body. The black-cloak must have sensed their approach because he suddenly straightened and turned to face the charging rider. His arms came up to cast a spell at the Knight of Alcea, but he was too late. Wylan's staff reached out with a fury, its tip crushing the mage's throat and tearing his head away from his body. As Wylan shook the skull from the tip of his staff, Wesik's horn slashed through the fabric of the tent. The unicorn carried his partner into the mage tent.

The commotion had already woken the remaining seven black-cloaks. Shouts of surprise filled the tents as the unicorn slashed his way inside. Arms rose threateningly towards the Knight of Alcea on the unicorn's back, but Wylan had anticipated such a response. He dove from Wesik's back as soon as he was through the tent wall. Half a dozen magical projectiles soared above the unicorn's back, some igniting the tent fabric, while others sliced through the thin material.

Wylan came out of his dive in a roll and sprang to his feet with his staff extended before him. The black-cloaks scattered, trying to put space between themselves and the staff-wielding lunatic. They were not all successful. Wylan jabbed his staff into the stomach of one mage and then snapped it upward when the mage doubled over in agony. The upward thrust drove the mage's nose into his brain. The black-cloak collapsed to the floor.

On the other side of the room, the forgotten unicorn sent the black-cloaks a message of his own. Wesik speared a black-cloak with his horn and then tossed the corpse at the remaining mages. Wylan took advantage of the distraction to move in closer and swing his staff

at the closest mage. The staff struck with a resounding crack. The mage's body flew through the air and slammed into one of the tent's supports. The tent shook wildly, and part of it started to collapse. Another part of the tent was burning from the earlier spells cast at Wylan. The Knight of Alcea knew that his time in this world was fast expiring. He tucked his staff in and dove towards the remaining mages, intent on taking as many of them with him as he was able to.

Wesik lowered his head and charged, spearing another black-cloak on his incredibly sharp horn. He felt two magical projectiles slam into his body in close succession. One spell struck his flank, and the searing heat felt as if it was rapidly eating through his flesh. The other spell was one of brilliance, and it struck his face. Wesik's world turned to blackness as he shook the mage's body off his horn. The pain in Wesik's flank grew excruciating, and the unicorn began to feel a loss of control of his hindquarters. Unable to see the enemy, Wesik started swaying his head back and forth as widely as he could, hoping to snare another mage before he died.

I am leaving you, my friend, the unicorn said to the Knight of Alcea. *It has been a pleasure to serve by your side.*

Strike to your left, Wesik, replied Wylan as he jabbed his staff into eye of another mage. *I will be joining you soon. You have been a credit to your race, but more importantly, you have been closer to my heart than all but Sheri. I shall miss you greatly.*

Wesik trusted Wylan enough to spend the last of his energy turning sharply to his left. He slashed his horn around wildly and felt satisfaction when a mage screamed in agony. He focused on the scream, shoving his horn as deep into the man's flesh as he could. The scream stopped abruptly.

Bowstring snaps sang loudly inside the tent. Wylan heard arrows thudding into Wesik's body just before he felt them striking his back. He arched in pain, his staff falling from numb fingers. A moment later, darkness claimed the Knight of Alcea, and his body tumbled to the floor.

Chapter 13

Stampede

Sinora was not in a position to see what was happening, but her herd sense felt Wesik's fear, anger, and great sorrow. The unicorn pulled on her reins, but the knot would not yield. With a sense of urgency, Sinora moved closer to the tree and reared, snapping the rein in two. At that moment, Twerp and another fairy swooped down out of the canopy.

"What are you doing?" scowled Twerp. "Be still or someone will notice you."

Let them notice. Sinora snorted angrily as she turned and raced for the place where Wesik was last seen. *Where have you been?*

Twerp had tried to land on the unicorn's head, but Sinora's sudden movements made that impossible. He flew alongside her, staring at her. "I was checking the spacing of the patrols, and I sensed another fairy. She brings news of great importance from Tagaret." Twerp suddenly noticed where the unicorn was headed, and he glanced across the clearing towards the burning tent and the four soldiers racing towards it. "What is going on?"

I do not know, but our friends are in trouble. Use whatever skills you have to hide what is going on, or we will all perish this night.

Sinora's horn suddenly appeared as they neared the tent. The unicorn was not quick enough to stop the four archers from firing into the tent, but they never got off a second shot. Sinora lowered her head and speared the closest archer. Her speed carried her forward and her horn broke through the other side of the human and gored another. With two men impaled on her horn, Sinora reared up and attacked the two remaining archers, her large hooves smashing down on their heads. As the unicorn returned her forelegs to the ground, a fiery projectile flew out of the tent and glanced off her back. The unicorn snorted angrily and tossed her head. The two impaled soldiers flew from her horn towards the mage.

The black-cloak had been in the process of casting another spell, but he quickly abandoned the idea as the bodies came hurtling towards him. He leaped out of the way of the bodies, but he lost his footing and tripped over the body of one of his companions. Sinora raced into the tent and shoved her horn into the mage's body as he tried to rise. She pulled her horn free and brought both of her front hooves down on the mage to make sure that he was dead.

Sinora? Is that you? Wesik snorted weakly.

Sinora turned towards the sound, her eyes scanning the carnage. Off to one side of the tent, she saw her mate. Wesik's flank was smoldering, and his faced was scorched black. Two arrows stuck out of Wesik's body, and tears flowed from Sinora's eyes.

I have come to take you home, Wesik.

I have run my last league, Sinora. Flee while you still have a chance. The humans will not be long in coming.

Sinora crossed the room and nuzzled her mate. Wesik was too weak to respond.

"Hurry up!" called Twerp. "I cannot hold this illusion forever. The tent is burning, and the smoke will distort the illusion. We will be discovered."

Sinora turned away from Wesik and saw Wylan on the floor. The Knight of Alcea also had two arrows in his back. Sinora was not sure if she had just seen Wylan breathe; there were no other signs of life in his body. She pawed the ground anxiously, refusing to abandon the ones she loved.

Where do these humans tether their horses, fairy?

"At the south end of the road," answered Twerp. "What do you want with horses?"

You will see. I want you to hold the illusion while I create a diversion. When the time is right, you are to gather our fallen so we may take them home.

"Take them home?" balked Thrip, the other fairy. "How?"

Sinora did not answer. Her horn disappeared, and she raced out of the tent, heading south along the Coastal Road.

"What is she up to?" Twerp said out loud.

A fool's mission. Wesik snorted weakly. *She may not return, but I would not let her down if I were you. Honor her wishes. Can you levitate one as large as me?*

"I have never tried," frowned Twerp, "but I think I can."

Could you still levitate me if Wylan and Sheri were on top of me?

"All three of you?" balked Twerp. "I don't know. That is a lot of weight, and we have nothing to tie them to you. They might slide off. Maybe between Thrip and me we can do it."

Well, you will try. If the weight is too much, you will leave me behind, and take Wylan and Sheri back to their people. The humans are known to honor their dead by burial. Go now and gather their bodies so we are ready when the diversion comes.

Thrip found Sheri's body outside the tent and slowly levitated it to Wesik. She moved Wylan's body next, and heard Wylan grunt. The fairy's heart filled with hope, but she did not mention it to the unicorn. She knew that Wylan and Wesik were very close, and the

unicorn needed no false hopes at the moment.

Suddenly, shouts rang out in every direction. Twerp looked nervously at his illusion and saw that the burning of the tent was no longer concealed. A large section of the tent was burning and the smoke billowed up into the night sky.

"We've been discovered," Twerp said softly. "I can no longer hide the truth."

Flee if you must, little ones, but wait for Sinora if you have the courage. I would consider it a favor if you helped her to escape from this place.

"I will stay," vowed Twerp. "We will all go home together."

"I agree," added Thrip.

You would make good unicorns.

Wesik's thoughts were weak, but Twerp recognized the tinge of humor held within the unicorn's mind speech. Suddenly, the ground rumbled and the shouts grew louder.

"What is that?" Twerp mused out loud.

That is a herd, little unicorn. This tent will soon become an island in the midst of the enemy's camp. Drop your illusion and get the Knights of Alcea out of here.

The rumbling intensified until the tent shook wildly. Twerp could still hear the shouting, but just barely. The noise of sixteen-thousand hooves sounded like constant thunder, and the ground felt as if an earthquake was sundering the road beneath the tent. Unexpectedly, Sinora burst through the wall of the tent.

Put the Knights of Alcea on my back, fairy, and be quick about it. We do not have much time.

Twerp and Thrip moved immediately. They levitated Wylan and Sheri onto Sinora's back and then looked up at the roof of the tent.

"How am I to get Wesik out of here?" asked Twerp.

I will cut a hole in the roof, promised Sinora. *Start levitating now.*

The fairies darted to Wesik and hovered over him. They raised the large unicorn off the floor and winced as Wesik screamed in pain.

Listen not to his cries, Sinora said as she bared her horn and sprouted wings. *Just carry him away from here.*

Sinora leaped into the air, and her horn sliced open the roof of the tent. Soldiers shouted and pointed at her, but she refused to fly away until Wesik was safe. She hovered over the tent as Twerp and Thrip slowly raised Wesik through the roof. Federation soldiers tore their attention away from the stampeding horses and aimed their bows skyward. Sinora dipped down and slid under Wesik, protecting him from the archers below.

Hurry, fairy. This is going to be painful.

Twerp swallowed hard as he looked down. If they lost their grip

on Wesik, the large unicorn would smash into Sinora and the Knights of Alcea, dooming them all to death. He grunted with exertion as he tried to rise faster. He heard the snap of bowstrings and saw arrows streaking skyward, but he didn't see any of the arrows hit anything. A few moments later, the dark sky had swallowed up the escapees, and Twerp set his mind to thinking about where he should take the wounded unicorn. If he set down too close to the camp, they might send searchers out and find them. If he took everyone back to Caldar, the Federation soldiers might also look there. In the end, it came down to exhaustion.

"I cannot continue," groaned Thrip. "I have not rested all day. My energy is spent."

Twerp nodded to the other fairy, and Thrip settled onto Wesik's body. Twerp felt the sudden strain of carrying the large unicorn alone, and he let the weight slowly drag him lower. As he passed below Sinora, he grimaced. Three arrows stuck out of Sinora's belly, and blood dripped freely down two of the shafts. The unicorn continued flying level, seemingly unaware that Twerp was landing.

"Sinora!" shouted Twerp. "We need to set down now. Follow me."

Sinora didn't answer, but she altered her course and started angling downward. Moments later, Twerp gently set Wesik on the ground in a clearing far from the road. Sinora landed a moment later, but her legs would not hold her upright. She toppled to the ground, spilling the bodies of the Knights of Alcea.

You have done well, little unicorn. Rest while Sinora goes for a healer.

"Sinora is not going anywhere," Twerp said hesitantly. "She took three arrows escaping. I will go for help."

The fairy didn't wait for a response. He leaped into the air, but he was weak with exhaustion. Knowing that he could not travel any great distance, he headed for the Rider's Rest in Caldar. He barely made it.

"Twerp!" greeted the female fairy. "What are you doing back here?"

"You must go to Tagaret," Twerp said weakly. "Tell them that two Knights of Alcea are dead, and their unicorns are dying. We need the best healers they can send and we need them now."

"Who is dead?" gasped the blue fairy.

Twerp bit his lip. What if others were in need of healing at the same time? If he told Tagaret that the Knights of Alcea were dead, might the Bringer send the healers where he thought they could do more good? Twerp was not going to allow any more deaths within his group. The unicorns were worth saving as much as anyone else.

"Tell the Bringer that Two Knights of Alcea need a healer immediately to survive," revised Twerp. "Also tell him that both of their unicorns are also close to death, and they cannot travel. We need

help desperately."

"But I am tasked to keep watch here," frowned the female fairy.

"Go!" snapped Twerp. "I will wait here in your stead. Hurry, or I will clip your wings."

"Ogre!" The female fairy glared at Twerp, but she quickly sped off.

Twerp sighed deeply and closed his eyes. In seconds, he was fast asleep.

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General Omirro woke to the thunderous noise and shaking tent. He bolted to his feet and raced to the flap, throwing it back. The first thing he noticed was the lack of guards outside his tent. His anger rose, but the emotion soon faded to confusion. The thunder grew louder and the quaking more severe. He stepped out of the tent and his eyes were immediately drawn to the approaching stampede.

General Omirro's command tent stood in the middle of the Coastal Highway. Just to its south stood General Barbone's smaller tent, and beyond that the tent for the black-cloaks. The mage tent was burning, but what caught the general's attention was the massive herd of horses bearing down on all three tents. He watched in awe as the stampeding herd split in two, as if the three tents were a large rock island in the middle of a swiftly flowing river. He silently prayed that the rest of the herd followed the leaders' actions. If they did not, none of the tents would survive, and General Omirro was not yet ready to lose his life.

As he stood frozen and stared in awe, movement above the mage tent caught his eye. He gawked in disbelief as he saw a winged-horse fly upward from the tent with two bodies draped over it. The magnificent beast halted its ascent and hovered over the tent. Within seconds, the prone body of a horse also rose out of the tent, but it did not appear as if the creature was alive. It had no wings and it mysteriously floated upward rather than flew. As General Omirro tried to make sense out of what he was seeing, the winged-horse moved directly under the floating one, and they seemed to rise together. Arrows suddenly streaked skyward, and the general watched several of them imbed into the winged-horse's underside. Before another volley could be sent skyward, the creatures vanished beyond the glow of the flames and disappeared.

"Did you see that?" General Barbone asked as he appeared before General Omirro. "What do you make of it?"

General Omirro stared up into the darkness for a moment before tearing his eyes away and focusing on the subordinate officer. "I do not know what to make of it, but I will have answers before the sun rises. Are your tent guards on station?"

“No,” answered General Barbone. “I thought they might be here, but I can see that they are not. Have we been infiltrated?”

General Omirro glanced at the tail end of the stampede and shook his head in confusion. He saw Colonel Verle racing towards him, and he turned to face the approaching officer. The colonel halted before the general and saluted.

“Are you safe?” asked the colonel.

“Safe and unguarded,” replied General Omirro. “I have tasks for you. First, post guards at my tent and General Barbone’s. Second, find the missing guards and have them arrested. Third, have the fire at the mages tent extinguished. Fourth, send out men to recover our mounts. Fifth, find out what has happened here tonight and report back to me. This army is not moving until I have satisfactory answers.”

The colonel saluted, but General Omirro had already turned to retreat inside his tent. General Barbone followed.

“Close the flap,” ordered General Omirro. “The dust raised by the horses is enough to gag on.” General Barbone dutifully closed the flap and General Omirro continued. “You were closer to the mage tent than I was, Barbone. What did you make of that winged-horse?”

General Omirro sat down and poured two mugs of cold tea. He placed one on the table and raised the other to his lips. General Barbone also took a seat and grabbed the other mug.

“It was not a winged-horse. It was a unicorn. I saw the horn extending from its head.”

General Omirro was about to say that unicorns were mythical, but then again, so were winged-horses. He said nothing, and General Barbone felt compelled to continue.

“I am not sure about the other one. I could not see its head. It looked dead to me, and it certainly wasn’t flying under its own power. Do you suppose the flying one was magically raising it?”

“I think not,” answered Omirro, “but I cannot be sure. I thought I saw two bodies on top of the flying one. Did you see them?”

“Clearly,” answered General Barbone. “They were Federation soldiers, but I could not see the patches clear enough to identify which army they belonged to. They also appeared dead. None of this makes much sense to me.”

“Nor to me,” General Omirro said before turning silent and sipping his cold tea.

General Barbone was well familiar with the moods of General Omirro, and he knew when not to speak. For a long time the two generals sat in silence until the tent flap opened and Colonel Verle entered. The colonel approached the table, and General Omirro informally waved for the officer to sit. The colonel raised an eyebrow in surprise, but he promptly obeyed.

“The missing guards will not need to be arrested,” opened the colonel. “Their bodies were found at the mage tent. It was difficult to identify two of them.”

“Explain,” General Omirro said curtly.

“The mage tent is a bloody scene, General. While we may never know exactly what happened there tonight, I can detail what I found. All eight of the black-cloaks are dead, as well as the four guards. A vicious, bloody assault occurred inside that tent. Some of it was magical, which is the origin of the flames, but most of it was physical. Outside the tent we found three bodies, two guards and a mage. The mage was decapitated, his head found elsewhere. The two guards were mauled by something massive and solid. Their skulls were literally crushed. Were it not for belongings on their bodies, identification would have been impossible.”

“What about inside the tent?” asked General Barbone.

“Another bloody mess,” frowned the colonel. “Two of the guards were gored by something very sharp, very long, and very large. Three of the mages were struck down with a staff, or at least I believe that to be so. We did find a staff amongst the wreckage, and their injuries were not as bloody as the other four. Those four were gored along the lines of the guards. I should also report that the tent was not only burning, it was slashed to pieces in several places, including the roof.”

“And the tether lines at the corral?” asked General Omirro.

“Slashed,” answered the colonel. “We definitely have saboteurs, General. Someone intentionally freed our mounts and caused the stampede.”

“What aren’t you telling me, Colonel?” scowled General Omirro.

The colonel fidgeted and sighed anxiously. “Men reported something very strange this night, General. I don’t know if the men should be punished for drunkenness or not, but the situation is serious enough to inform you of their comments. They claim that they saw a unicorn rise from the burning tent. Some said that a second unicorn rose, but that it was dead when it rose. There were also reports claiming that there were two dead soldiers draped over one of the unicorns. I truly do not know what to make of these tales.”

“Take the men at their words,” frowned General Omirro. “I do not understand what is going on, but General Barbone and I saw something similar. The gore wounds that you spoke of, could they have been inflicted by something like a unicorn’s horn?”

“Assuming that the creatures were unicorns,” shrugged the colonel, “I guess that would be possible. It is as good an explanation as anything I could come up with.”

“I take it that you do not believe in unicorns, Colonel?” General Omirro asked.

“I do not believe in anything that I cannot see or touch,” answered the colonel, “but I stand ready to accept your word on the matter.”

General Omirro sighed and smiled slightly at the colonel’s discomfort. “I don’t believe in them either, but they were here tonight. I want a headcount of our men, Colonel, and I want it immediately. People saw two dead soldiers on the back of that unicorn, and I want to know if they were men of Team Caldar.”

The colonel nodded and rose to his feet. He saluted briskly and quickly departed the tent.

“What did you mean if they were ours?” asked General Barbone. “They definitely wore Federation uniforms. I saw that with my own eyes. What other army could they belong to besides ours?”

“You are asking the wrong question, Barbone,” replied General Omirro. “The real question is why the unicorns would take humans from the camp in the first place? Why would the unicorns take away the bodies of two of our men? If they wanted information about our orders or purpose for being in Alcea, they would have abducted live soldiers to interrogate, not recovered dead bodies.”

“Well,” retorted General Barbone, “I said that they appeared dead. I suppose that they could have been magically put to sleep. Am I missing something?”

“You are indeed. The unicorns did not use a staff to kill the black-cloaks. The humans did. That means that the unicorns were removing their confederates from the enemy’s camp. Two beasts, two riders. Whether they were alive or dead really doesn’t matter to the logic of it all. Taking what I just said as truth, the unicorns have allies that have access to Federation uniforms. More importantly, the Alceans know that we have arrived in their country.”

“How can you be sure that it is the Alceans behind the attack?” asked General Barbone. “What if it was Tauman’s men trying to make us fail? You know that he is disappointed about not being involved in the attack on Alcea. Making us fail might be his way of making himself look better.”

“There is truth to your words,” agreed General Omirro, “but the end result is the same. If Tauman wants us to fail, he would merely tell the Alceans that we are here. He certainly has access to all the portals. Either way, the Alceans know that we are here, but I personally do not think Tauman would stoop so low. Besides, I don’t think Tauman could keep unicorns a secret for very long. They must be Alcean creatures that our spies did not discover.”

General Barbone sighed heavily and nodded in agreement. “What does this mean to our plans then?”

“This knowledge means very little to our plans,” answered

General Omirro. “We are facing eighteen-thousand men in all of Sordoa. We are twenty-thousand strong, and we have forty-thousand comrades joining up with us at the walls of Trekum. Sordoa is going to fall regardless of the existence of unicorns. The biggest impact of tonight’s raid is the loss of our mages, and that tells me a great deal about our adversaries. They could have tried to take out the leadership of Team Caldar, but they feared our mages more. That tells me that they have no mages to stand against us and that pleases me. Sword for sword, we will devastate the Sordoans. They cannot stand against the might of the Federation.”

Chapter 14

Day Four

The knocking was incessant. King Arik subconsciously tried to put it out of his mind, but it continued with annoying regularity.

"Are you going to see who that is?" asked Queen Tanya. "Or do I have to get out of bed?"

King Arik immediately sat up and opened his eyes. "I thought I was dreaming," apologized the king. "Stay in bed, Mother. I will see what the problem is."

The queen laughed. "Now that woke me up more than the knocking did. I am not even showing yet."

The king grinned and hurried to the door. He cracked it open and saw a Red Sword officer with a grim face waiting on the other side.

"I am sorry for disturbing you, King Arik," apologized the soldier. "I know that you had a late night of it last night, but I think this warrants your attention. We had a fairy arrive from Sordoa. She reports that two Knights of Alcea and two unicorns are in dire need of healing."

King Arik's heart skipped a beat. He knew that Wylan and Sheri were the Knights of Alcea being referred to. The only other Knight of Alcea in Sordoa was Prince Darok, and he was at the opposite end of the country. If it was two of them hurt, it had to be the human couple. The king frowned deeply, but he didn't respond immediately. Obviously a healer needed to be sent, but that was something that Prince Oscar would normally handle. The prince knew the locations of all of the healers. He would know who was closest. After a healer was dispatched, the prince would notify the king so that they could discuss the problem with the king's advisors. King Arik knew that there was more to the problem. The officer would not have come to the king otherwise. The king looked into the officer's eyes questioningly.

"What is the rest of the message?"

"That was the entire message," replied the officer hesitantly, "but I think the fairy is lying."

"Lying?" echoed the king. "Why do you think that?"

"I heard her talking to another fairy," frowned the officer. "She indicated that the two Knights of Alcea were really dead."

King Arik gasped loudly, grabbing the queen's attention. It was one thing for a Knight of Alcea to be wounded and need a healer. It was a more frequent occurrence than the king would have liked, but

the Knights of Alcea tackled only the toughest tasks. Injuries were not uncommon. It was a far different story to hear talk about the death of one of the king's chosen.

"What is it?" asked Queen Tanya as she arrived at the king's side.

"Wylan and Sheri," King Arik replied softly, supreme sadness evident in his voice.

The king and the officer stood facing one another, and neither of them spoke. Tanya knew what Arik had meant when he mentioned the names of the two Knights of Alcea. Only their deaths would strike him so hard. She eased in front of him and addressed the officer.

"Call the Council of Advisors together," instructed the queen. "They are to assemble immediately. And inform Prince Midge to halt all outgoing fairies."

"And detain the fairy from Sordoa," added King Arik. "She has some explaining to do."

The Red Sword officer saluted and retreated. The queen closed the door and stared at the king.

"What is wrong with the fairy from Sordoa?" she asked.

"The fairy reported that the Knights were wounded," explained the king, "but she was overheard saying that they were really dead. I will not stand for the truth being withheld from me."

The queen could see tears starting to well up in Arik's eyes, and she knew that she had to keep his mind occupied with something other than the deaths of two Knights of Alcea.

"Let's get dressed," Queen Tanya said authoritatively. "As long as the Council is being assembled, this will be a good opportunity to discuss what has happened so far."

The king nodded absently and began getting dressed. Neither of them spoke again until they entered the council chambers. Some of the advisors were already there, but not all of them. Some of them did not reside in the Royal Palace. Prince Oscar was one of the advisors already present, and he was orchestrating the morning meeting. Fairies buzzed nonstop to and from the prince, and servants brought in trays of hot tea and fresh bread. The king and queen grabbed cups of tea and chunks of bread and waited silently for the rest of the advisors to arrive. The king was anxious about the delay, but he wanted to avoid repeating anything, and he wanted everyone's input. When General Gregor arrived, he called the meeting to order and demanded that the Sordoan fairy repeat the message. She delivered the exact message that Twerp had requested.

"Are Wylan and Sheri alive?" asked the king.

"I do not know," frowned the fairy. "I have delivered the message that Twerp asked me to deliver."

"Then why were you overheard saying that they were dead?"

scowled the king.

Prince Midge was alarmed by the king's words. The fairy people were sworn to the Bringer and it disturbed him greatly to think that one of his people might deceive the Bringer. He settled on the king's shoulder and glared at the other fairy. The tiny woman bit her lip and trembled slightly.

"Twerp changed his message," the fairy offered timidly. "I do not know why, but he said they were dead at first. I have not told anyone that they were dead. I only remarked to another fairy that Twerp changed his message. Someone must have overheard me say that."

"Show us the images," demanded Prince Midge.

The fairy instantly complied, showing the original message and the eventual one. King Arik was satisfied that the fairy was not deceiving him.

"Where were Wylan and Sheri supposed to be when they were struck down?" the queen asked the fairy. "Was it at the Doors?"

"No," answered the fairy. "I am stationed at one of the Doors. Both of the Doors have already been removed. I think they were going to attack the mages, but I am not sure."

"Did they know about the fear spell?" asked the queen.

The fairy frowned and looked confused. It was obvious that she did not know what the queen was asking. Prince Oscar quickly glanced at his notes until he found what he was looking for.

"Did Thrip arrive down there?" asked Prince Oscar.

"Yes," the fairy nodded, grateful that she did not have to answer the queen's question. "Thrip arrived a couple of hours before Twerp. He said that he was searching for Wylan but couldn't find him. He asked me if I knew where they were, and I said that I did not, but I suggested that he look near the enemy camp."

The King looked questioningly at his father.

"Thrip was carrying word of the fear spell to Wylan and Sheri," explained Prince Oscar. "It looks like he arrived too late."

King Arik bit his lip in concentration and began pacing the floor. Eventually, he turned to face his father.

"I do not want any more attacks on the black-cloaks," declared King Arik. "Get that word out immediately. And get a healer to the unicorns in Sordoa. We will resume this meeting as soon as that is done."

"The closest mage we have is Podil," stated Prince Oscar. "She is a Sorelderal elf, and is highly skilled, but she is not close to Caldar. She is in Pontek at the other end of Sordoa. I have already sent a fairy to summon her to aid the unicorns. Prince Midge and I will immediately dispatch the other messages you requested. We will be right back. It won't take but a minute."

The two princes left the room, and General Gregor stepped over to the wall map of Alcea. He spoke to no one in particular, but all heard his voice.

"Sometimes we forget that the fairies cannot deliver messages instantaneously. While they fly faster than we can imagine, Alcea is a great nation, and it spans hundreds of leagues in each direction. For example, the time it takes a fairy to fly from Caldar to here and then send another fairy to Pontek, followed by a unicorn ride back to Caldar, will take almost an entire day. That is a long time for two unicorns to lie bleeding."

"What is your point, General?" snapped the king. "Are you reminding me of how I am wasting the lives of Alceans?"

The general turned around to face the king. His face showed no sign of hurt from the king's attack. He knew the strain that King Arik was under, and he knew how much the king blamed himself for each and every death.

"No, King Arik. The point is to remind everyone here of the vast distances involved in this war. You depend upon our advice, but I often think that such details escape our notice. We have grown so accustomed to people stepping into this room from the other side of the world, that we forget the limitations that we have to deal with within our own country."

"I think I understand where you are coming from, General," interjected the queen. "Perhaps we would be wise to station healing mages throughout the country to respond to problems like the one we face today. Are there other resources that we should consider doing the same?"

Prince Oscar and Prince Midge reentered the room.

"I don't know about stationing other resources," Lord Markel responded, "but I think we need to recall our Knights of Alcea from Zara. We had a close call in Lanoir, and now a disastrous one in Sordoa. These Federation armies are going to tax our forces to the limits. We need our people here to help us."

"I agree," offered Lord Clava. "The wars of liberation in Zara cannot succeed if we fail here in Alcea. The Knights of Alcea are the most potent weapons we have. I suggest that the king recall them."

So more of them can die, the king thought bitterly. The queen knew what was going thorough her husband's mind, and she did not want him to express his thoughts out loud.

"There are only four Knights of Alcea left in Zara," stated Queen Tanya, "I also think they should be recalled, but no one else. The small contingent of Rangers over there are needed where they are, and they should stay there. As for Jenneva, she is not in Zara. She is in Cordonia seeing to the movement of Doors from one Universe to

another. She will be returning here today after the final set of armies arrive there."

"General Ross and General Haggerty," nodded Prince Oscar. "They should be arriving in Darcia at this very moment. They are the only Federation armies due to arrive in Alcea this day. If I may also offer my agreement of having the Knights of Alcea return to Alcea for the next couple of weeks, I do so. I know that they are instrumental in running things in Zara, but their skills are sorely needed here at home. The wars in Zara will run on our schedule, but here in Alcea it runs on the Federation's schedule. We need them, King Arik."

"It would be a mistake to remove Karl Gree from Tyronia," declared Theos. "Unlike the other Zaran countries under the thumb of the Federation, Tyronia has no Ranger to guide them. There is only Karl, and the Tyronians will see his removal as a breaking of faith. They depend on him daily."

"I can live with that," conceded Prince Oscar. "If Karl is instrumental to the Tyronians, then let him stay, but the others are not tied to any one country as Karl is. Alex, Tedi, and Natia should return to Alcea."

King Arik nodded his approval. "See to it after the meeting. Where do we stand on our own actions against Force Targa?"

"We have two days before the first of the Federation armies arrives in Targa," answered General Gregor. "I have already managed to sneak the Alcean Rangers out of the city as well as two-thirds of the Red Swords. The final third of the Red Swords are due to depart today. That is going to leave little protection around the king, and that concerns me greatly, but we need to draw our forces out of the city quietly to avoid tipping off the enemy spies."

"I am still here," Theos stated gruffly. "No harm will come to King Arik."

"What are the plans for pulling out the regular army?" asked Tedi's father. "It will not be possible to sneak them out unnoticed."

"You are correct, Lord Markel," answered the general, "but it will be too late at that point for the Federation spies to do any damage. The Rangers and Red Swords total four-thousand men. Their primary goal the first two days is to simply harass the enemy and slow them down. Once the Federation troops arrive in Danver Shores, there will be no more armies coming from Zara. All Doors will be out of commission, so the spies cannot get word back to their homeland. At that time the six-thousand men of the Targa Army can openly march out through the city gates. That is when the real defense of Targa will begin."

"And that will be?" asked Lord Clava.

"In five days," answered the general. "The Rangers and Red

Swords only have to harass the Federation armies for a couple of days. They are up to that task."

"Have there been any more discipline problems with the regular army?" the queen asked the general.

General Gregor frowned and nodded. "Even more than the last time we spoke. I am at a loss to explain it other than guess that they all know the war is coming soon, but I am finding alarming levels of irritableness, not only among the soldiers, but the palace staff and the citizens, too. Everyone seems to be snapping at one another for no apparent reason."

"That is hardly the spirit we expect within a city about to be under siege," replied the queen. "It was certainly not the spirit of Tagaret during the last war. Everyone came together like never before."

"And it made a great difference," nodded the general. "That is why I find this irritableness alarming. Now is not the time for it."

"Carry on," King Arik said abruptly as he turned and headed for the door.

Queen Tanya and Prince Oscar exchanged worried looks, and the queen left the group and hurried after the king. The room fell silent as the royal couple exited the council chamber. When they were gone, Arik's two fathers huddled together.

"I am worried about him," Lord Clava said softly. "He is taking these deaths too hard."

"The Knights of Alcea are all personal friends to the king," replied Prince Oscar. "A certain amount of such feelings is only natural."

"It goes far beyond that," countered Lord Clava. "He is blaming himself for their deaths. It will destroy him."

Prince Oscar sighed and nodded. There was no use in denying the truth, and Lord Clava knew well the boy he raised as his own. "I don't know how to handle it," he admitted. "Nor does the queen. We can stand here all day and say that such feelings are illogical, but that will not stop the king from having them. What do you want me to do?"

It was Lord Clava's turn to sigh. "I truly do not know. If I did, I would do it myself. I am just worried for him."

"We all are," agreed Prince Oscar. "That is one of the reasons why I readily agreed to have the Knights of Alcea return from Zara. The one person who might be able to get Arik to snap out of this is Alexander Tork. Arik still sees him as his mentor."

"And he can accomplish what the queen can not?"

"More than the queen and two fathers put together," smiled the prince. "In fact, I sometimes think our advice is discounted because we are relatives of the king. Alexander Tork has a history of speaking plainly to kings, and Arik will know that the words spoken are true

and unbiased. He will listen to Alex."

Lord Clava nodded with satisfaction and drifted off. Prince Oscar was about to leave the room to send out the fairies to Zara when Zalaharic approached him. The elven healer nodded to Prince Oscar and then to Prince Midge on Oscar's shoulder.

"I was wondering a few things," Zalaharic began. "Both of you saw the images of Twerp. What did you make of them?"

"They were fairy visions," answered Prince Midge. "What is there to think of? They were true replications of the original events."

"True replications," offered the elf, "or true events?"

The fairy prince frowned in confusion, and the elf smiled.

"Twerp contradicted himself," the elf continued. "Both statements could not possibly be true. Are fairies prone to lying?"

Prince Midge blushed bright green, and it was obvious that he was uncomfortable about the questions being asked.

"Let me save the fairy prince from some embarrassment," chuckled Prince Oscar. "While the fairy people are generally honest, they have been known to lie when they think a lie is the only way to achieve their goal. If Twerp did lie, and it is obvious that he did at least once, he would not do so in a malicious way."

"Then what was his goal?" asked Zalaharic.

"To get healers," Prince Midge declared. "I should think that much is obvious."

"For whom?" asked the elf.

"Ah," Prince Oscar nodded. "I see where you are going with this. You think Twerp wanted us to think that the Knights of Alcea were still alive so that we would send healers for the unicorns?"

"A valid question," responded Zalaharic. "Prince Midge, would a fairy think that King Arik would value the life of a unicorn any less than a human?"

"I would not think so," frowned Prince Midge. "The Bringer is known to be thoughtful of all his subjects, but Wylan and Sheri were no ordinary humans. They were Knights of Alcea and close friends of the king. Such people are guaranteed to get the attention of King Arik, no matter what race they are."

"Well," interjected Prince Oscar, "that sheds light on one of today's mysteries then. Those unicorns must need healing rather badly. Twerp was trying his best to see that they got the help that they needed."

"I concur," replied Zalaharic, "and that means that the unicorns are very close to death. They need help as quickly as we can get it to them."

"I agree," nodded Prince Oscar. "I have already sent a fairy to summon Podil. She is the closest mage."

“The closest,” retorted Zalaharic, “but not the quickest. Unless my calculations are off, a unicorn from Tagaret can reach Caldar before Podil can. She is farther south, requiring the fairy to fly much longer before she even starts her journey to come back north.”

Prince Oscar frowned and pulled out his notes. He made some quick calculations and nodded vigorously. “You can beat her by two to three hours, but aren’t you needed here?”

“I am needed where the situation is most grim,” answered Zalaharic. “I would not care for my absence to be noticed unless it is necessary.”

Prince Oscar nodded as the elf turned and walked away.

“I hope he is not needed here while he is in Sordoa,” frowned Prince Oscar. “He is the most talented healer in all of Alcea.”

“Jenneva says that he might be the greatest healer of all time,” countered Prince Midge. “Shall I send a fairy to Zara and summon the Knights of Alcea?”

“Please do. The sooner they get here, the better I will feel.”

* * * *

Alex, Tedi and Natia stepped through the Door to the Royal Palace in Tagaret. Jenneva stood waiting for them. As Alex and Jenneva embraced, Tedi and Natia continued onward to their quarters.

“I am glad that you have come,” Jenneva said softly. “Arik is not handling the deaths well.”

“Tanya will handle the king,” replied Alex.

“No.” Jenneva shook her head. “She cannot. I cannot. Prince Oscar and Lord Clava cannot.”

Alex frowned deeply. “And you think I can?”

“I know that you can,” Jenneva answered as she took Alex’s hand and led him away from the Door. “You have a way with illogical kings.”

Alex snorted and shook his head. “My manners with kings has never been appreciated before. What makes you think he will listen to me?”

“Your manners may not have been appreciated, but you always got your point across, and the kings always ended up seeing things your way. You have a manner of analyzing a problem and presenting only one solution, the appropriate solution. Besides, Arik still thinks of you as his mentor. He will listen to you.”

Alex sighed and nodded. “I will try, but there are no guarantees. We have returned from Zara to shed the enemy’s blood, not to be the king’s caretaker. He has two mothers for that.”

Jenneva smiled and squeezed Alex’s hand. “I imagine that he will need them when you are through with him.”

Jenneva led Alex to the king's study, but the guards refused to knock on the king's door.

"He was very adamant," stated one of the Red Swords. "He wants no visitors. None."

"Just knock on the door," growled Alex. "I do not have time to play games."

The guards refused to budge. Alex shook his head and sighed. He reached out and took Jenneva's hand, guiding her away from the door. After he had taken a dozen steps, he let go of her hand and stealthily reached into a pouch at his waist and extracted three Lanoirian stars. He spun around and threw the three stars at the king's door, one after the other. The guards' jaws dropped, and they immediately pulled their swords and stepped in front of the door, blocking the entrance with their bodies. Alex slowly walked towards them, and the Red Swords prepared to kill a legend or die in the process. One of the guards shouted for reinforcements, and distant footsteps echoed off the walls.

"I will see the king," Alex declared, keeping his empty hands away from his body. "If you would prefer to kill me, do so and get it over with."

The king's door suddenly opened and Queen Tanya stared out of the room. Her eyes took in the stars imbedded in the door and Alex approaching the drawn swords. The sound of running guards grew louder by the second.

"Sheath your swords," commanded the queen. "My parents will be admitted."

"But the king…"

"Do it!" snapped Tanya. "I am the queen, and I will be obeyed."

The Red Swords hesitated only a moment before sheathing their swords and retreating to the sides of the door. The queen stepped aside as Alex entered the study, retrieving his stars as he passed by. Jenneva followed him, and the queen closed the door.

"You were recalled to shed the enemy's blood," Queen Tanya quipped, "not the Red Swords."

"Where is Arik?" Alex asked brusquely.

The queen's eyebrows rose at her father's tone, but she pointed to the couch that delineated the sitting area of the King's Study. Alex strode across the room and around the couch. The king was stretched out on the couch, and while his eyes were open, he did not acknowledge the Knight of Alcea. Alex reached down and swept the king's legs off the couch, forcing the king to sit up and acknowledge him. Tanya gasped, and the king's face filled with anger. He opened his mouth to berate Alex, but the Knight of Alcea did not give him a chance to speak.

“I know that I could die for manhandling you,” scowled Alex, “so spare me the lecture. I do not plan to live long anyway.”

The anger drained out of Arik’s face and confusion took its place.

“We are in the midst of a war, Arik,” Alex continued. “We do not have time for you to wallow in self-pity. Do you think you are the only person who loved Wylan and Sheri? Do you think that the rest of us do not carry a heavy heart over their loss?”

“It is not the same,” protested the king. “They died for me.”

“Nonsense,” Alex retorted loudly. “They died trying to protect Alcea, just like thousands more will die in the next few weeks. Some of them you may have never met, but others will have been near and dear to your heart. Those are the fortunes of war. Learn to live with it.”

“I can’t,” the king replied haltingly. “I sent them down there to die.”

Alex’s voice softened. “You sent soldiers on a mission, Arik, just as I have done for my entire life. Look around this room. We have not chosen the lives we lead. We have all consigned people to death through our orders, but we have also saved many people as well. I have probably lost more friends than you will ever have. None of those deaths were easy to take, but their lives were not wasted. They were soldiers, and they fought for something that they believed in, something that they valued more than life itself. Honor their courage and service by doing what you can to achieve the goals they sought, not by trying to measure the worth of the missions they died on. Wylan and Sheri were exceptional people. That is what made them Knights of Alcea, but they were not immortal.”

“Like we are,” scowled the king.

“We are not immortal, my friend,” Alex replied in a voice almost as soft as a whisper. “While the Mage has endowed us with a longer lifespan than most, we can die just as easily as Wylan and Sheri. In fact, the odds of our deaths are increased without a lucid king to lead us. Wylan and Sheri deserve our grief, but not right now. Right now they deserve to see the Federation destroyed, and we can do that, but you must lead us properly if we are to succeed. Be all that you can be, Arik. Be a king that will keep Alcea safe for future generations. That is what the Knights of Alcea are willing to trade their lives for. We die not for you, but for the future of Alcea.”

King Arik nodded as he absorbed Alex’s words. He still felt a great void in his heart at the loss of Wylan and Sheri, but their deaths now held more meaning for the king. He tried to shut out his feelings, but he kept seeing their faces.

“Now,” Alex said in a conversational tone as if the previous discussion had not taken place, “I would like a briefing on where we

are at. It is obvious that we will have to make some adjustments to the plan, but I think we are flexible enough to get that done. Give me a summary of what is happening in each province, and we can work together on the plans."

Queen Tanya opened her mouth to reply, but Jenneva nudged her daughter to stop her from speaking. She knew that Alex was purposely taking the king's mind off Wylan and Sheri. King Arik nodded and rose to his feet.

"I guess we should start with Lanoir," stated the king. "Bin-lu and Rut-ki appear to be on schedule…"

Chapter 15

Stranded

Colonel Nyack stretched his arm upward to halt the 5th Corps of the Empire of Barouk. Behind them on the snow-covered Cordonian road, the 14th Corps of Ertak also came to a halt. General Ross and General Haggerty had been riding together in the middle of the two armies, and they glanced at each other questioningly.

"It is too early for the vanguard to be making camp," frowned General Ross. "I am going forward to see what the problem is. Join me."

The two generals rode past the halted columns of soldiers until they reached the vanguard. Colonel Nyack sat astride his horse waiting patiently.

"We are an hour short of camp," stated General Ross. "Why have you halted the column?"

The colonel waved his hand towards the distant hill. "Something is not right here, General. There should be a farm here, but it is gone."

The two generals turned and stared at the level area before the distant hill. Snow covered the landscape, but it was certainly not deep enough to hide a farm. General Ross turned and gazed at the path before the column of soldiers. That land was also snow-covered and unblemished.

"Are you sure that we are on the road to Kantor?" asked General Ross. "It was fall when you were here last. Things will look different when everything is coated in white."

"I am sure," declared the colonel. "I know the features of this land. There should be a farm right here."

"Bah," scowled General Haggerty. "The very fact that the farm is not here disproves your words about knowing this land. Have you gotten us lost?"

General Ross turned to General Haggerty with a stern, disapproving expression on his face. General Haggerty immediately lost his scowl and looked away from General Ross, seemingly losing interest in the conversation. General Ross calmly returned his attention to the colonel.

"How do you explain the lack of a farm?" General Ross asked Colonel Nyack.

"I cannot," frowned the colonel, "but the barn was quite large. Even if it collapsed under the weight of winter snows, the debris

would still be visible. Something in not right here."

"Were there other structures?" asked General Ross.

"A three-story farmhouse with a stone chimney."

"Take a squad and investigate the farm," ordered General Ross. "Return when you are satisfied."

The colonel nodded and called for a squad to form around him. The soldiers rode off into the snow, and General Haggerty returned his attention to General Ross.

"I do not understand why you indulge him so," complained General Haggerty. "We are wasting valuable time standing here."

"Colonel Nyack is an extremely talented officer," General Ross responded softly. "He is well aware of the need to maintain our schedule. He would not halt this column for a trivial matter."

"But farms do not just disappear," retorted General Haggerty. "The colonel is merely mistaken in his recollection of this land."

"I will be the judge of that," countered General Ross, exerting his authority as the leader of Force Cordonia.

"I would expect no less," frowned General Haggerty, "but the lack of a farm is hardly a significant factor in our conquering of Cordonia. The more likely problem is that we are not on the Darcia-Kantor Road at all. This whole blasted land is covered by snow. We can't tell a road from a gully, and if we are lost, we will need as much daylight as possible to find the hidden cache of supplies. We cannot afford to dally here while your favored colonel tromps around in the snow."

"You also had a colonel visit this land last fall," replied General Ross. "Send him on ahead to verify the hidden cache."

General Haggerty watched as Colonel Nyack and his men started returning towards the column. He shook his head. "That would only waste more time. It would seem that Colonel Nyack is already coming back."

The two generals sat silently waiting for the colonel and his squad to return. The colonel ordered the squad to halt when they neared the column. He continued onward and approached the generals.

"There is no sign of a farm," Colonel Nyack said softly. "I cannot explain it, General, but something is dangerously wrong about this whole situation. I thought it odd that the inn was deserted when we came through the portal this morning, but that could be explained away by a number of possible reasons. There have been a few other irregularities along our route, but they were not significant. The lack of a farm here is most disturbing. I do not think we are where we are supposed to be."

"You mean we are lost?" quipped General Haggerty.

"No," the colonel replied adamantly. "I know exactly where we are, but this land is not the land that I visited in the fall."

General Haggerty opened his mouth to offer another quip, but General Ross's glare forestalled his words.

"Colonel, take your squad forward to the campsite. Verify the cache and return. I will lead the column behind you, so leave a well-marked trail." General Ross waved dismissively at the colonel and turned his attention to General Haggerty. "General, send a couple of plainly-dressed men back to Darcia. I want a report on both portals, and I want to know what the people of Darcia are doing. Specifically, I want to know if our presence here has been reported to anyone."

* * * *

The squad leader led his men stealthily northward, away from the Barouk-Ongchi Road and the safety of the encampment of the 9th Corps and the 25th Corps. He was tired of only catching small game, and one of the men had seen a small herd of deer in the distance. As he approached the small glade where the deer had been spotted, he gave the signal to halt. The twenty Baroukan soldiers stopped and listened. The forest was deathly still, and no deer were in sight. Still, the thought of fresh venison whetted the appetite of the squad leader. He signaled his men to fan out and surround the glade. If there were deer in the fringe surrounding the glade, his squad would get them. Of that he was sure.

The squad leader waited patiently for his men to get into position. He could not see any of his men, so signals were out of the question. He based his movements on time alone, and when he felt enough time had passed for all of his men to be in position, he stealthily moved forward, arrow nocked and ready to strike a killing blow. He proceeded slowly through the trees, pausing frequently to listen for any sounds of movement. Occasionally, he thought he heard sounds of his immediate flankers moving towards the glade, but he could not be sure. The sounds had been faint as he would have expected from his men. They were, after all, professional hunters.

Eventually, the squad leader reached the glade. It was empty. He sighed with disappointment at not finding any deer, although there was evidence of their recent passage. As he waited for his men to join him, the squad leader wondered if he should try tracking the deer, or return closer to camp and settle for rabbit and squirrel. He debated the pros and cons for a moment before his brow furrowed. Suddenly aware that he was alone, he wondered what was keeping his men. They should have arrived around the same time as he did. With a shiver of nervousness, the squad leader softly called out to his men. No one answered. He called louder. Still no response.

Shaking with fear, the squad leader stepped into the trees. He moved slowly, swiveling his head constantly in an effort to detect any movement in the forest. He detected nothing, but he soon came across

the body of one of his men. The soldier was dead, his throat slashed from ear to ear. The soldier's sword was missing. The squad leader stowed his bow and arrow and drew his own sword. Turning parallel to the glade, he moved cautiously through the trees. A little while later, he came upon another body. He, too, had been taken by surprise and his sword was missing. Fear overcame the squad leader, and he bolted away from the body.

Running as fast as his legs could carry him, the squad leader raced towards the Federation encampment. As he came over the crest of a low hill, the sun reflected off something. The squad leader instinctively threw himself to the ground. For a moment, he lie panting, waiting for an arrow to slam into his body, but the killing blow never arrived. When he regained his breath and a small bit of composure, he sheathed his sword and raised his head to peer down into the valley. In a small clearing at the bottom of the hill, dozens of dancing lights beamed towards him. The squad leader frowned in confusion. He realized that the sun was reflecting off of something metallic, but he could not see past the dazzle to identify the object.

Fearing enemy soldiers, the squad leader eased back over the hill and then set a course perpendicular to the one he had been traveling. When he had traveled far enough to alter his angle to the sun, he crept back up to the ridge and peered down into the clearing. His jaw dropped as he stared into the clearing. The metallic objects were swords stabbed into the ground, but that was not what caused the squad leader's heart to throb like a galloping horse. The swords were arranged to form an arrow pointing directly at the Federation encampment. The squad leader counted the swords, and the message became clear. His entire squad was dead, and their swords were used to show the squad leader the way back to his camp. The enemy wanted him to survive. They were taunting him. The knowledge that his life had been spared did not ease the man's fear. The squad leader rose and ran towards the camp, hysterically screaming of an attack.

* * * *

General Kolling and General Gertz sat in the large command tent, a squad leader standing before them.

"The portals are gone," reported the squad leader. "Both of them were cut out of the walls and taken away. The men left to guard them are dead. There were also soldiers watching both places. I think they were meant to trap anyone coming back to the portals, but we detected them and avoided them."

"There is an enemy army behind us?" General Gertz asked in alarm.

"No." The squad leader shook his head. "They appeared more like a city guard than an army, and there were not many of them. I think

my squad could have defeated them, but my mission called for information not bloodshed."

"You have done well," stated General Kolling. "I have no further orders for you at this time."

The squad leader saluted and turned to leave the tent. When he opened the flap, the distant shouting was clearly heard by all.

"Find Colonel Ednor," ordered General Kolling before the squad leader could leave the tent. "Have him discover the reason for the shouting and report to me immediately."

The squad leader acknowledged the order and left the tent.

"So we are stranded here in Alcea?" asked General Gertz.

"I think you are drawing too wide an inference from isolated incidences," replied General Kolling, "but there is a possibility that you are correct. We know that the portals in Barouk have been seized, but I also noticed that they were not simply destroyed. I have to wonder what use the Alceans would have for such portals."

"To send their armies into Zara?" General Gertz asked in alarm.

"I do not care for Tauman personally," frowned General Kolling, "but I would not want to lead an uninvited army through those portals into his domain. The 1st Corps would decimate the Alceans as they tried to get through the portals, plus they would be abandoning their homeland for the armies of the Federation to pillage and plunder unopposed. That strategy makes no sense to me. They have something else in mind."

"What could they possibly have in mind?" scoffed General Gertz. "If they know that we are here, they must also know about the other armies all over Alcea. No one could be so foolish as to mistake their inevitable defeat for anything else. Their easiest path is to surrender. They cannot even put a scratch on the armies that are amassing around them."

The tent flap was pulled away and Colonel Ednor entered the tent. General Kolling waved the colonel forward.

"The camp is in a bit of an uproar," reported the colonel. "One of our squads decided to forage a bit deeper in the forest than we have been doing. Only the squad leader returned alive."

General Kolling sat unmoving, his face emotionless, but General Gertz scowled in disbelief.

"They dared to attack us in daylight? How many of the enemy died before the lone coward returned?"

"The enemy remains unseen," reported Colonel Ednor. "The entire squad was destroyed without a sound. The only reason the squad leader returned is that the enemy allowed him to."

"Preposterous," scoffed General Gertz. "The squad leader should be hung as a coward for all to see. We must make an example out of

him."

"How does he know that they allowed him to flee?" General Kolling asked calmly.

"They took the swords off their victims," answered the colonel. "They stabbed the stolen swords into the ground to form an arrow pointing the way back for the squad leader. They seek to drive fear through our entire camp, and I think they are succeeding. The other foraging teams are finding excuses not to venture out of camp."

General Kolling sighed and nodded. While the other two men watched wordlessly, the general unfolded a map of Lanoir and spread it out on the table. After a few minutes of silence, General Gertz could no longer hold his tongue.

"What are you looking at the map for? There is only one road between Barouk and Ongchi."

"Indeed," General Kolling responded, "and the enemy knows we plan to march along it. That has given them knowledge of the terrain before us that we do not possess. I will not do what the enemy expects me to. Colonel, I want you to identify the fishermen among our ranks. If we abandon the road for the next few days, we can travel along the coast. That will protect one flank of our armies, and it will also give us an opportunity to harvest the sea instead of foraging in the enemy's forests."

Colonel Ednor smiled and nodded. "I will see to it, General."

"And find a way to calm the camp," General Kolling continued. "If we need to make an example of the errant squad leader, you have authorization to proceed, but I am hesitant to combat fear with more fear. That should be a last resort."

General Gertz stared at the map and shook his head. "We cannot follow the shoreline all the way to Ongchi. It would add many days to our journey."

"True," conceded General Kolling, "but we can follow it for a few days before we have to return to the road. I expect to build up a larder that will eliminate the need for excessive foraging. I will not let a handful of the enemy disrupt our schedule."

* * * *

On the Coastal Highway south of Caldar, General Omirro and General Barbone stood watching the tents being disassembled. Colonel Verle rode up to the generals and dismounted.

"We are breaking camp?" asked the colonel.

"We are already half a day behind schedule," replied General Omirro. "We must leave now if we are to eat tonight without foraging."

"We are going to have to forage," stated the colonel. "Colonel Pineta led some men south to search for any horses that might have

headed that way. When he was in the vicinity of tonight's camp, he thought to check the cache. It is gone."

"Gone?" gasped General Barbone. "Why didn't Colonel Pineta report that directly to me?"

"He is still searching for lost horses," explained Colonel Verle. "I promised to carry the report here for him."

"I was afraid of that," sighed General Omirro.

"You were expecting this news?" scowled General Barbone. "How could you possibly suspect such a thing? The location of the cache was supposed to be secret."

"Our enemies are not impotent," retorted General Omirro. "In fact, they seem to be rather clever."

"If you find them so clever," snapped general Barbone, "perhaps you can enlighten me. Why don't they just attack us if they know where we are?"

"They will," replied General Omirro, "but not yet. They seek to slow us down first. They want the 10th Corps and the 22nd Corps to be tired, hungry, and in poor spirits. When things look like they can't get any worse, they will attack."

"Do you really expect the Sordoans to come full force against us?" asked General Barbone.

"I do not know," admitted General Omirro. "I think that depends on whether they know about the other two prongs of the attack. If they are ignorant of those other armies, they will attack us with everything they have. That would prove to be a disastrous mistake for the Sordoans, but it will also mean great losses for our two armies. We need to be prepared for such an eventuality."

"We could send men back to the portals," suggested General Barbone. "We could have Tauman's 1st Corps attack and hold Caldar and send supplies behind us. That will eliminate the need for foraging."

"There are two problems with that plan, General," sighed General Omirro. "Tauman is still holding Camp Destiny as a precaution against the Alceans sending troops to Zara. He will not allow his army to enter Alcea to seize Caldar."

"And the other problem?" asked General Barbone.

"I do not expect the portals to be whole," answered General Omirro. "If the enemy knows we are here, I suspect that they know how we got here. They will certainly have destroyed the portals to prevent reinforcements. Colonel, did you send men back to the portals as I requested?"

"I did," replied Colonel Verle. "I have not yet heard back from them. They are already overdue, but I advised great caution with the portal in the city. I did not want to draw undo attention to the

existence of the portals."

"Wise." General Omirro nodded. "Did you instruct the men to inform Tauman of what happened here?"

The colonel nodded as the tent flap opened. A captain entered the tent and saluted.

"The portals are gone," reported the captain.

"Gone?" asked Colonel Verle. "Do you mean destroyed?"

"No, Colonel. I mean gone. The portals were removed. There is nothing left at either place except large holes in the walls."

"Then we are stranded here?" questioned General Barbone. "How are we to return to Zara?"

"Without provisions." General Omirro nodded. "As for returning to Zara, we have a war to win before that question requires an answer. We need to get this army moving now."

* * * *

General Ross and General Haggerty rode to the side of the column and halted as they saw the rider heading towards them. The 5th Corps continued to march past them. The rider reined in his horse and stopped alongside the generals.

"Darcia doesn't exist," reported the captain.

"Doesn't exist?" frowned General Haggerty. "Do you mean that the people have abandoned it?"

"No, General," replied the captain. "I mean that the city is no city at all. It is fake. The buildings have no interiors. In fact, the farther one gets from the inn, the less complete the buildings are. Some of them are merely facades supported by rough beams, and the construction is recent."

"What about the portals?" asked General Ross.

"Gone," reported the captain. "They were ripped out of the surrounding walls and taken away."

General Haggerty shook his head in confusion. "I cannot understand what is going on. Our supplies are missing, a farm is missing, and now we learn that the city is fake. I do not understand it."

"I will not claim to understand it either," commented General Ross, "but I do understand the implications. This place that we are in is not Cordonia, and wherever it is, we are stranded here."

"How can it not be Cordonia?" asked General Haggerty. "Even your Colonel Nyack says that the land is known to him. It has to be Cordonia."

"Does it?" frowned General Ross. "Why?"

General Haggerty's mouth opened, but he could not find the words to express himself. General Ross sighed anxiously and continued.

“We marched our armies through magical portals, General. Now, I do not claim to understand magic any more than the next man, but if such devices are capable of taking us to Cordonia, why do you find it hard to believe that they could just as easily take us somewhere else?”

“How can you remain so calm?” scowled General Haggerty.

“Because hysteria solves nothing,” General Ross sighed. “The next thing we need to discover is where in the world are we? The snow attests to a northern clime, but we can’t even be sure which continent we are on. We need to proceed with extreme caution. We are expecting to face the six-thousand men of the Cordonian army, but that may not be the case. We might be facing an even greater army.”

“Could we merely be in a different part of Cordonia?” asked the captain.

“That is possible,” mused General Ross. “Ask Colonel Nyack if he has any star charts for Cordonia. Perhaps that will illuminate us.”

The captain saluted and rode forward in search of Colonel Nyack. The generals watched the young officer leave and then rejoined the column.

“How will we ever return to Zara?” General Haggerty asked softly.

“There are many questions to be answered,” General Ross responded. “We know that someone built the fake Darcia to trick us, and I suspect that they were Alceans. My first question is whether the other two prongs of Force Cordonia were similarly tricked, and if so, where are they in relation to us?”

Chapter 16

Day Five

Dawn was just breaking over the city of Tagaret, but some of the Knights of Alcea were already hard at work. Alex, Jenneva, Tedi, and Natia sat in the library in the Royal Palace of Tagaret. On the table before them sat a large map of Alcea, its corners held down by dirty plates left from the early morning meal.

"Natia and I can take the place of Wylan and Sheri in Sordoa," stated Tedi, "but I don't understand how we can be multiple places at the same time. There are armies arriving in both Gortha and Pontek this morning. We can't possibly attack the mages in both armies at the same time. They are forty leagues apart."

"Why is it imperative to kill the mages so early in the campaign?" asked Natia. "Surely, we can do one set of mages one night and another a different night."

"The black-cloaks need to be the first attacked," answered Jenneva. "If they are not, they will construct magical defensives and alarms. That will make it much more difficult to get at them."

"They already have magical defenses," Tedi pointed out. "This spell of fear thing scares me. How are we supposed to get around it?"

"I am not sure," admitted Jenneva, "but that is a mild defense compared to what they are capable of. Imagine an enemy campsite that will awaken the moment an enemy penetrates the perimeter. If the mages construct such an alarm, we will never get near them."

"Why don't they have that now?" asked Natia.

"Because it has not been necessary," offered Jenneva. "Mages do not waste energy. Generally, the opposite is true. They conserve their power until it is needed. They will reside in the very center of the Federation camps and depend upon the soldiers to protect them. If such a defense seems to be failing, the black-cloaks will take measures of their own. That is why they must be the first to die, and that holds true for each of the armies coming from Zara."

"Not exactly true," interjected Alex. "The plans call for ignoring the mages in some of the armies until the day of attack. The armies coming into Pontek are an example of that, but such is an exception to the rule."

"Why is Pontek exempted?" asked Natia.

"The dwarves will take care of those mages in their own way," smiled Alex, "and it will not involve entering their tent at night. You

still need to deal with the black-cloaks coming into Gortha, and that army will be arriving this morning. We need to understand this fear spell much better than we do. I read in the reports last night that the fairy people did not appear to be affected by the spell. At least that seemed to be the case in Lanoir. Do you know why, Jenneva?"

"I know too little of their magic," Jenneva replied with a shake of her head.

"Because fairies are fearless." chirped Bitsy.

Alex smiled and turned his head to find Bitsy sitting on a shelf behind him. He picked her up and deposited her on the map.

"It is rude to spy over one's shoulder, Bitsy," quipped Alex. "If you wish to join the conversation, stand where we all can see you."

Bitsy beamed with the attention given to her, but a dark shadow soon loomed over her head. She looked up nervously to see Alex holding a massive book above her.

"What are you doing?" trembled Bitsy as she scooted away. "One slip of that book and you would doom me. I would be like an ant under your boot."

"So much for your theory on fearless fairies," chuckled Alex. "Tell me, Bitsy, why would your people not be affected by such a spell?"

"I don't know," the tiny woman responded as she watched Alex return the book to the shelf behind him. "Maybe fairies don't often think of the consequences of their actions. Humans always seem to dwell upon such things."

"She might have something there," mused Jenneva. "Bin-lu is certainly no coward. He has undertaken missions that would cause most men to tremble in debilitating fear, but he had the inner courage to see them through to completion, yet according to his report, this spell of fear paralyzed him."

"I am not following you," frowned Natia. "What is your point?"

"Bin-lu accepted missions that scared him," explained Jenneva, "but he conquered his fears before encountering the source of them. In essence, he dwelled upon the upcoming fears and conquered them. In the case of the mage tent, he was not prepared for the fear and it overwhelmed him."

Alex frowned doubtfully. "I am sure that Bin-lu felt fear going into that tent without the aid of any spell. If he did not, he would be a fool, and Bin-lu is no fool."

"He had accepted a certain level of fear," countered Jenneva, "and he was prepared for it, but he was not prepared for the spell." Jenneva sighed. "I wish his report had detailed his feelings more. I would like to know what thoughts went through his head before Shrimp snapped him out of the spell."

"You think Shrimp broke the spell?" asked Tedi.

“It sounds like it to me,” answered Jenneva.

“This does not explain why Shrimp was not affected by the spell,” interjected Alex, “but it does cause me to question the effectiveness of the spell if one is prepared for it. Could this same spell account for the Federation soldiers’ avoidance of the black-cloaks?”

Jenneva raised an eyebrow and nodded. “It could. A subtle aura of fear would cause the soldiers to avoid contact with the mages. Is that significant?”

“I think it is,” replied Alex. “It would explain why the black-cloaks were using it when Bin-lu attacked. It was not necessarily that they were expecting an attack, but rather a standard procedure used to keep everyone at bay.”

“That makes sense,” agreed Jenneva. “If each black-cloak kept such an aura around himself, he would not want it to dissipate while he was asleep. To make up for that, they would keep one black-cloak awake at all times, casting a collective aura for himself and all of his sleeping comrades. That might also explain why black-cloaks always seem to travel in pairs. They never want that aura to dissipate.”

“And a collective spell for eight black-cloaks would be considerable,” nodded Tedi. “I think I can begin to understand what Bin-lu must have experienced. I am not sure that I can overcome such a spell.”

“We need to approach this problem carefully,” warned Alex. “King Arik cannot stand the loss of any more Knights of Alcea. He takes these deaths rather hard. We need to understand exactly how this spell works before thinking that we know a way around it.”

“What are you proposing?” asked Jenneva.

“I am not sure,” admitted Alex. “There are three Federation teams arriving today. Of the three, only Team Gortha needs to be attacked right away. Perhaps we should all go to Gortha together.”

“The Federation teams will start arriving in Targa tomorrow,” warned Tedi. “We can’t fly down to Sordoa and be back up here tomorrow. It will take all day just to get down there.”

The door to the library opened and Prince Oscar walked in. He set a pair of boots on one of the tables and approached the Knights of Alcea. He looked at the map and then the Knights.

“You are all up early,” he remarked with a smile. “What are we planning?”

“We are discussing the fear spell,” answered Alex. “What news do you have today?”

“The Federation armies are discovering the loss of their Doors,” answered Prince Oscar. “Kolling, Omirro, and Ross all discovered that their portals are gone. These men are no fools.”

“As Clint has warned,” nodded Alex. “Is that it?”

“There is nothing else of significance out in the field,” the prince replied. “I will have written reports soon if you would like to read them.”

“I would,” answered Alex. “Why did you say out in the field? Are there problems here in Tagaret?”

Prince Oscar frowned deeply and nodded. “Healers all over the city sent messengers to the palace during the night with pleas for assistance. It seems as if some sort of plague has broken out in Tagaret. It couldn’t have come at a worse time, especially with everyone already being rather irritable.”

“Can it be contained?” asked Jenneva.

“I do not know,” answered Prince Oscar. “It appears to have broken out all over the city at the same time. The worst part is that Zalaharic has left the city. Perhaps you could help out, Jenneva?”

Alex raised an eyebrow. “Where has Zalaharic gone?”

“He slipped out of the city yesterday,” revealed the prince. “He felt a duty to aid Podil with the wounded unicorns. The king is not aware that he is gone.”

“I will do what I can,” offered Jenneva.

Alex started pacing the floor. He halted near the boots and picked them up to admire the workmanship.

“Get healers from Elderal,” Alex said softly. “I have need of Jenneva for something more important.”

“More important than Tagaret?” challenged Prince Oscar. “Maybe I didn’t explain the severity of the problem. The plague is affecting the whole city. That includes the Targa army. The army is supposed to march out of the city in four days. If the plague is not contained soon, it will not be able to leave the city. That will leave just the Rangers and the Red Swords to go up against Team Miram. They will be outnumbered five-to-one.”

“What do you need me for?” asked Jenneva.

“For Gortha,” answered Alex. “I think we need a mage present when we approach the tent of the black-cloaks. We need someone powerful enough to stand against eight battle mages in case we are trapped by the spell of fear.”

“Let the black-cloaks wait,” decided Jenneva. “Prince Oscar is right. We need to get this plague under control, and we need to do it quickly.”

Alex nodded in defeat. He turned his gaze to Tedi and Natia. “Do not attack the black-cloaks. Remove the Doors from Gortha and Pontek once the armies are out of the area, but do nothing more until you hear from us.”

“No harassing or slowing the armies down?” frowned Tedi.

“No,” Alex replied. “The Federation team out of Pontek will be

handled by Prince Darok and his dwarves. There is no need for you to be involved in that. As for Team Gortha, I do not want them harassed until their black-cloaks are dead. What you can do, however, is concentrate on Team Caldar. First, verify if Wylan and Sheri were able to eliminate their black-cloaks before they died. If they were successful, do what you can to slow General Omirro down. We will deal with General Ritka and Team Gortha later. Read whatever Prince Oscar can give you on Force Sordoa before you leave."

"I understand," nodded Tedi. "We will get ready to leave and then check with Prince Oscar."

The gypsies left the library, and Prince Oscar huddled with Jenneva as they laid out a plan for combating the plague. Alex returned to pacing the floor, seemingly unaware that he was still holding the boots that Prince Oscar brought into the room with him. As the Knight of Alcea was deep in thought, Prince Oscar reached out and pulled the boots from Alex's hands. Alex looked up in a start.

"They were not meant for you," chuckled the prince. "These are the boots for a king."

"They are finely crafted," Alex admitted with admiration for the shoemaker who had created them, "but I can't picture Arik wearing them. The gold trim alone would put him off. Arik does not care much for the trappings of wealth."

"I agree," Prince Oscar responded, "but they were a gift from a citizen, left at the gate this morning. Arik will no doubt wear them at his next public appearance and then store them in a closet somewhere."

"What citizen would offer such an ostentatious gift?" asked Alex. "Surely, the citizens of Tagaret know that Arik is not the type of king who covers himself in gold."

"The citizens of Tagaret are well familiar with the king's taste," answered Prince Oscar, "but these boots are from a Cordonian who has recently moved here. The man is the finest shoemaker to ever grace this city, and he charges the least for his wares. The king has already fielded complaints from the other shoemakers. They claim that Artimor is selling his footwear for less than they could make it."

"Is he?" asked Alex.

"I don't know," shrugged the prince. "His prices are cheap, but he does a tremendous amount of business. I imagine that he can charge less because of the volume. I bet half the army uses his services, and it only takes so much profit to pay the rent. I suspect the other shoemakers are merely jealous. You should see this Artimor while you are in the city. You look like you could use a new pair of boots."

"Maybe I will," sighed Alex. "I will have precious little else to do with my time while Jenneva travels around the city with you."

“Hopefully we will nip this plague in the bud,” smiled Jenneva. “Busy yourself with Oscar’s reports. I am sure that he won’t mind.”

“Not at all,” smiled Prince Oscar as he held the door open for Jenneva. “I will tell the guard at my office to expect you.”

Alex watched them leave and then returned to pacing the floor. Thinking that he was alone, the tiny voice startled him.

“You want to kill those mages,” declared Bitsy. “I can tell. What is stopping you? You are as fearless as a fairy.”

Alex halted and turned to stare at Bitsy. The tiny, blue woman still stood on the map of Alcea. Alex smiled at her.

“You know me too well, Bitsy, but while your skills are impressive, I do not think that you can handle eight battle mages by yourself.”

“And why would I have to?” asked the fairy. “If there is only one mage awake, and he is the one holding the fear spell over the tent, I could just put him to sleep.”

Alex raised an eyebrow at the fairy. “We are not sure that fairies are immune to the spell. What if Shrimp was some weird exception that the spell did not affect?”

”Then I will become afraid before I enter the tent,” shrugged the blue woman. “If that happens, they will not know that I was ever there. I will flee and we can try something else.”

“Or the black-cloaks will detect you,” frowned Alex. “We still do not understand their capabilities very well.”

“None of my people have been detected yet,” retorted Bitsy. “We have entered temples and even the Black Citadel. The black-cloaks have not discovered us yet. Why not give it a try? There is nothing else to do while we wait for Jenneva.”

Alex grinned and nodded. “Perhaps fairies are fearless after all. Let’s go down to the stables and see if Kaz and Yorra have arrived yet.”

* * * *

The unicorn glided to a stop in the small clearing and Podil dismounted. She nodded to Zalaharic as she let her eyes look over the bodies on the ground.

“I wasn’t aware that you were coming, Zalaharic,” Podil said in greeting. “What is the situation?”

“I am not here officially,” Zalaharic replied, “but I saw that I could get here quicker than you. I could not allow the four of them to lie here untended any longer than necessary.”

“The four of them?” echoed Podil. “I was led to understand that only the unicorns were alive.”

“That is what Twerp believed at the time he sent the message to Tagaret,” stated Zalaharic, “but he was wrong. Technically, at least.

Wylan is close to death, and Sheri is not responsive."

"Not responsive?" questioned Podil as she knelt next to Sheri.

"I have never seen anything quite like it," commented Zalaharic. "It is as if she is in a frozen state, her life put on hold awaiting some signal to awaken, but I cannot imagine what such a signal would resemble. I have chosen to leave her until last. Her health does not appear to be degrading, and the others need immediate assistance."

"Tell me how I can help," Podil said as she rose to her feet and turned away from Sheri.

"Sinora will need further healing," explained Zalaharic, "but she is stable for the time being. I am most concerned about Wylan and Wesik. Wylan has lost a lot of blood, and the arrows damaged him internally. I am not yet sure of the exact degree of damage, but he could use some more Kioji tea. I did not expect four severely hurt patients, and I have used up my supply. Did you bring some with you?"

"I have some," nodded Podil. "I will make the tea up immediately. What about Wesik?"

Zalaharic sighed, and Podil sensed the weariness in him. She knew that the flight from Tagaret must have taken the best part of a day. She also knew that Zalaharic would not have given thought to resting while others remained untended.

"Wesik is bad. His flank was hit with a spell of fire, and it has burned through flesh and muscle. It will take a great deal of effort to heal such a wound, and even then, I do not know if he will ever walk again. He is also blind. A spell of brilliance must have struck him squarely in the face."

You summarize well, elf. Waste not your time on me. A unicorn who can neither see nor run is hardly worth restoring to life. Tend to the others.

"I am the healer here, Wesik," retorted Zalaharic as he placed his hand on the unicorn's head and called forth a spell of sleep. "You stick to what you know and let me handle what I was trained for."

Podil raised an eyebrow and glanced at Zalaharic. "Is he talking to you?"

"He was," Zalaharic answered sharply. "He was telling me to let him die and concentrate on the others. I put him to sleep. I do not need such a distraction."

"They are a proud people," Podil remarked softly as she stared at Wesik. "They are perfect companions for the Knights of Alcea."

"I prefer patients who are not eager to die," retorted Zalaharic.

Podil frowned. She had never heard Zalaharic complain before. She knew that the long flight from Tagaret would have taken a toll on the male elf, but she was sure that Zalaharic had spent most of his energy since arriving in the small clearing. Considering the conditions

of the wounded, she realized that Zalaharic must have used tremendous amounts of energy on them. “You are tired, my friend. Catch some sleep while I am fresh. I will keep them alive and wake you when I need you.”

Zalaharic sighed and nodded. “Two hours. Nothing more.”

Podil nodded in agreement, and Zalaharic spread out on the grass. He was asleep within minutes.

* * * *

General Ritka of the 21st Corps of Spino stepped through the portal and into the barn outside of Gortha in the Sordoan Province of Alcea. He waited impatiently until his horse was brought through the portal for him and then he mounted the horse and rode out of the barn. Most of the 21st Corps had already passed through the portal and secured the farm. He rode confidently into the morning sunshine and looked around, slightly disappointed that Sordoa did not appear much different than his own country of Spino. Colonel Pierce hurried to his side as soon as the general was noticed.

“The farm is secure,” reported the colonel, “and the vanguard is already on the way to the rendezvous point. They may have already met up with General Stemple and the 29th Corps by this time. Shall I escort you?”

“There are ten-thousand men already showing me the way, Colonel,” scoffed General Ritka. “I think I can mange without your help. See that all of the men make it through the portal.”

The general spurred his horse to action, leaving the rebuffed colonel behind. As the general followed the column of soldiers, a warning spread through the ranks before him. The marching soldiers, fearful of arousing the general’s anger, quickly moved to the side of the road, creating a pathway through the center of the column. General Ritka smiled inwardly as he watched his army cower before him. He galloped all the way to the rendezvous point and was slightly miffed to find General Stemple waiting for him. Ritka did not care much for the Aertan general assigned to him, and he made a point of making Stemple feel inferior.

“You needn’t have hurried Stemple,” greeted General Ritka. “I would have thought it was obvious that the 21st Corps will take the vanguard. The 29th Corps will follow behind.”

“As you wish,” General Stemple replied with a shrug. “This is as fine a place as any to wait for your men to pass by. Will you be in the vanguard yourself?”

“Of course,” retorted General Ritka. “You don’t really expect these Sordoans to cause us any trouble, do you?”

“Certainly not,” General Stemple smiled thinly, hoping that a small attack would come soon and strike the vanguard. “I doubt we

will run into any trouble between here and Trekum. Safe journey to you."

General Ritka ignored Stemple's words and continued towards the head of the column. Colonel Viya watched the Spinoan general leave and then approached his fellow countryman.

"How can you stand being under him?" asked the Aertan colonel.

"What choice do I have?" shrugged General Stemple. "He must have licked the right boots in Despair to become the leader of Team Gortha. We can only hope that he meets an untimely death soon. Perhaps his own men will accidentally slay him in the first battle."

"I know you say that in jest," frowned the colonel, "but the men of the 21st Corps have no love for General Ritka. He is a pompous fool, and every one of the Spinoans knows it."

"It was only partly in jest, Colonel," General Stemple said softly. "Ritka is careless, and that is dangerous for an army in enemy territory. He acts as if the Sordoans will be no challenge for his mighty army, but even a cornered squirrel can attack ferociously. His leadership will cost the lives of many men before this war is over. Our task is to make sure that our Aertans are not among the dead."

"That could be difficult," warned the colonel. "The men of the 21st Corps are frightened, General. I was talking to some of their officers when we were waiting at Camp Destiny. There are rumors spreading through the 21st Corps of monsters in Sordoa."

"Monsters?" balked the general.

"Dwarves in particular," clarified the colonel, "but other creatures as well."

"Dwarves are extinct," scoffed the Aertan general.

"Don't try to tell Ritka's men that. They are certain that we will meet up with dwarves, and they are deathly afraid of them. It has gotten so bad that the officers have threatened to whip any man who mentions dwarves, yet the rumors still spread like a wild fire. I fear if it comes to fighting, the 29th Corps will have to take the brunt of it. The 21st Corps will be worthless."

"We only have seven days before we join forces with Team Pontek," said General Stemple. "Then it becomes the problem of General Gattas. He is the leader of Force Sordoa, and I don't think he cares for Ritka any more than we do. In fact," he added with a smirk, "it might be fun to watch and see how Gattas handles Ritka. That moment might well be worth putting up with that insolent Spinoan idiot for seven days."

Chapter 17

Lies

General Montero stepped outside the inn in Pontek. He glanced around the streets and found them deserted except for the soldiers of the 15th Corps of Ertak. He had not expected many citizens to be awake at such an early hour, but neither did he expect the city to be deserted. He waited outside the inn for his horse to be brought to him. As he waited, he turned and glanced back at the inn. He saw a sign hanging on the building stating that the building was for sale.

"Your horse, General," came a voice from behind him.

General Montero turned and nodded to Colonel Patrey. "Where are all the people of Pontek, Colonel?"

"I suppose what is left of them are sleeping," answered the colonel. "Pontek has been practically deserted for months, General. When I was here in the fall, I saw signs offering one-year contracts for tradesmen and laborers. It was quite the talk of the town then. I suppose many of the citizens of Pontek took the jobs."

"You suppose?" pressed the general. "Are you not concerned when things turn out differently than you expected?"

"General Tauman's reports state that the population of Pontek has diminished greatly," replied the colonel. "I am suspecting that the cause is due to the offers of jobs. I do not know that for sure, but the low population of the city is what I expected. I imagine the few people left in Pontek will hide when they notice a foreign army in the city."

General Montero nodded with satisfaction. He had been mentally preoccupied before the invasion with the problem of losing custody of his brother, Prince Harold of Ertak, and he had not bothered to read Tauman's reports. If Colonel Patrey had been expecting the current situation, that was good enough for the general. General Montero mounted his horse and gazed down at the colonel.

"I do not wish to waste time in this city hunting for citizens," ordered the general, "but you will order the men to slay any that they come across. I also want a detachment sent to the harbor. Disable any boats found there. I do not want anyone carrying word of our arrival north to Trekum."

Colonel Patrey nodded his agreement. "There is also a fishing village just north of the city. We spoke about it last fall."

"I remember the conversation, Colonel. Send a company forward and destroy the village."

“Disable the boats?” asked the colonel.

“Raze the village, Colonel. Destroy everything and everyone.”

“I will see to it,” promised Colonel Patrey.

General Montero turned his horse and headed north to meet with General Gattas of the 6th Corps of the Empire of Barouk. Gattas was the leader of Force Sordoa and a rising figure in the Federation. Montero had specifically asked to be teamed up with Gattas because he thought the Baroukan’s influence could help if he had trouble deposing his father upon return to Ertak. Gattas was known to bend the rules when he needed to, and that was exactly what Montero planned to do. It was time for King Harowin to give up the throne of Ertak.

Colonel Patrey watched the general ride away and then quickly issued orders for the boats in the harbor to be disabled. He sought out another colonel of the 15th Corps and assigned him to direct the army northward. When that was done, Colonel Patrey selected a company from his own regiment to raze the fishing village. At the head of one-hundred riders, Colonel Patrey raced out of the city and north along the coast to reach the village before the fishermen put out to sea.

The sun was just breaking the horizon when Colonel Patrey and his company reached the village. He frowned when he saw that another company of Federation soldiers was already there, but he was not surprised. Colonel Wuler of the 6th Corps had been with Patrey in the fall, and they had both spoken of destroying the village. It irked Patrey to have been beaten to the prize by his rival.

“You’re a tad late,” grinned Colonel Wuler. “Did you think I would forget?”

Colonel Patrey glanced around the small village and frowned. All of the boats were gone, and there was not a person in sight other than Federation soldiers. He dismounted and stormed into the closest hut. No one was inside. He turned and ran outside and into another hut. With a sigh of frustration he exited the hut and stared at Colonel Wuler.

“Where are the people?”

Wuler pointed out at the sea. Patrey gazed out at the small boats bobbing on the waves, but he was staring directly into the sun. He could see the boats far off the coast, and he could make out the shapes of fishermen in the boats, but he could not see things clearly.

“The women and children, too?” he asked Colonel Wuler.

“I cannot tell, but it hardly matters now, does it? We aren’t going to wait for them to come ashore and surrender.”

“General Montero will be livid,” replied Colonel Patrey. “He fears that the fishermen will carry word of our arrival north to Trekum.”

“In those boats?” laughed Colonel Wuler. “I don’t think so. It’s

over forty leagues to Trekum, and I remember what those boats looked like last fall. I would not take any one of them out of sight of land, and I mean that with only one person in it. If they do indeed have their families onboard, they will all die before this day is over."

Colonel Patrey looked at the distant boats bobbing on the huge angry swells and nodded in agreement. Most of the boats were single-man boats and they would be sorely overloaded with entire families stuffed into them. Still, he did not wish to report a failure to General Montero. Such was not the way to move up in the ranks of the 15th Corps.

"Burn the buildings," Colonel Patrey shouted to his men. "Leave no wall standing."

Colonel Wuler smirked. "And you will hope that General Montero does not ask any questions as he passes?"

"You obviously had the same orders as me, Wuler," retorted Colonel Patrey. "Are you so anxious to report your failure to arrive in time to kill everyone here?"

Colonel Wuler laughed. "I will only report the truth, Patrey. I will say that the village was entirely destroyed and that we did not leave a single person alive in the village."

Colonel Patrey grinned. "I could get to like you, Wuler. You are devious."

"I have had a great deal of practice, Patrey."

Far off the coast, the fishermen shouted and pointed towards the burning village. Women cried and the children started asking questions that no one wanted to answer. One ancient man looked at the old woman beside him on the floor of the small boat.

"It is as the fairy predicted," the ancient man said softly. "She saved our lives."

"Our lives are not yet saved," frowned the old woman. "We have no homes to return to now, and these seas still seek to claim us."

The fisherman manning the sails looked down at the old woman with a warm smile. "Homes can be rebuilt," he said confidently, "and the sea will claim nothing from our village. Have faith in your fellow villagers. We will return to shore after the armies have passed by."

* * * *

Team Darcia was no longer an army on the move. Although the sun was well into the sky, General Ross and General Haggerty sat inside the large command tent sipping tea and gazing at a map of Cordonia. The tent flap opened and a black-cloak entered. General Ross immediately felt a shiver of fear, but he ignored it. He had long grown accustomed to the feeling whenever black-cloaks were around. He realized some time ago that it was a magical defense created by the mages. He waved the black-cloak forward.

“What have you discovered?” asked the leader of Force Cordonia.

“Paso and Carid are also false cities,” the black-cloak reported. “They are even less elaborate than Darcia. I believe the Alceans took extra care of Darcia because our portals were located too close not to make it believable.”

“And Kantor?” asked General Ross.

“It does not exist,” answered the mage. “I flew high over the land, and I did not see any signs of human life at all. Other than the locations of the three fake cities, there is nothing to indicate that man has ever walked these lands.”

“Yet you agree that we are in Cordonia?”

The black-cloak sighed. “The skies tell me that we are in Cordonia, but that is not possible. The terrain is the same as Cordonia, but no one can make everything just disappear. It makes no sense.”

“You haven’t really answered the question,” frowned General Haggerty. “Are we in Cordonia or not?”

“We are not in the Cordonia that we expected to be in,” answered the black-cloak. “We are in a false Cordonia.”

General Ross raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Is this all an illusion of some kind? Are the Alcean mages talented enough to accomplish something like that?”

“It is not an illusion,” answered the mage. “What you see and feel around you is real. It just is not the Cordonia that we expected. It is something that I cannot explain.”

General Ross did not like the answer, but he accepted it. “What about the portals in Paso and Carid?”

“All four of them are just like the ones in Darcia,” answered the black-cloak. “The portals have been physically removed and taken away.”

“So there is some kind of life in this Cordonia,” stated General Haggerty. “Someone took those portals and hid them.”

The black-cloak merely nodded.

General Ross started writing messages, and the black-cloak stood patiently waiting. When General Ross was done, he slid two papers across the table to the mage.

“These are orders for Team Paso and Team Carid,” explained General Ross. “I want you to understand them before you take them so that you can tell General Testa and General Nunes that they mean exactly what they say.”

The black-cloak nodded in understanding.

“Both teams are to cease their march on Kantor and set up permanent camps where they are,” declared General Ross. “While our armies can survive by foraging, it makes no sense to gather sixty-thousand men in one place. The forest would not support such a large

gathering. I want you to explain to the generals what we have discussed here. I want them to be fully informed of our situation. I also want the black-cloaks assigned to those armies to start surveying the land around them in ever widening circles. I want to be informed immediately of any sighting of people or structures, anything that would indicate life in this Cordonia."

"I will arrange for daily reports from my people," promised the black-cloak.

General Ross nodded and waved the mage away. The black-cloak turned and left the tent.

"I do not like to be around them," General Haggerty said softly after the mage was gone.

"That is how they like it," General Ross replied. "They carry an aura of fear around them at all times. It is meant to make people uneasy in their presence. Once you know about it, it becomes easier to handle."

"Do you think they will find any life here?" asked General Haggerty.

"I don't know," frowned General Ross, "but they will continue searching until they do, even if they have to search all of Alcea."

"All of Alcea?" echoed General Haggerty. "I am not sure that I understand your words. Do you think they made all of Alcea disappear?"

"I am not sure what to think," admitted General Ross, "but I have sixty-thousand men under my command. I have to start thinking about how to protect them."

"But no enemy has even been sighted," General Haggerty said in confusion. "Who are you trying to protect them from?"

"Themselves," answered General Ross, "or each other. You and I can sit here calmly and discuss this problem, but do not expect the men to react the same way. If they think that there is no chance of returning home to their loved ones, things will get rather ugly here. We have to be prepared for that."

"What are you saying?" gasped General Haggerty. "You can't possibly mean that we will never return home?"

General Ross sighed. He had thought that he could rationally discuss the situation with the Ertakan general, but Haggerty's emotional response disappointed him.

"We could start the men building ships," General Ross said with a hint of false optimism in his voice. "There is plenty of wood, and I suspect more than a few of the men have worked in shipyards at one time or another, but that is a plan for the future. Right now we need to let the mages gather information."

General Haggerty nodded enthusiastically. "You shouldn't scare

me like that. Sometimes I can't tell when you are joking."

General Ross smiled silently at the Ertakan general. Ross was fairly sure that if the mages found no life in all of Alcea, there would be none in Zara either. Wherever they were, the mage had made it clear that man had not walked these lands before. Ross could not quite comprehend the whole situation, but he suspected that he was in a different world than the one he had known before. The only way of completely understanding their predicament rested in speaking to one of the elusive Alceans they had come to kill. That thought did not please the Force Cordonia leader.

* * * *

Kaz glided through the night sky and landed on the Gortha-Trekum Road north of the Sordoan city of Gortha. Alex instructed the unicorn to ride northward as the Knight of Alcea tried to get mentally prepared for an infiltration of the Federation camp. After they had ridden a short ways, a tiny blue head poked out of Alex's pocket.

"Are we there yet?" whispered the fairy.

Alex smiled. "Do we look like we are surrounded by twenty-thousand Federation soldiers?"

Bitsy squirmed out of the pocket and leaped to Alex's shoulder. "I was just asking," retorted the fairy. "Have you decided on a way into the camp yet?"

"I think I have," Alex nodded as he ran his hand lightly over Kaz to signal a stop.

The black unicorn slowly eased towards the side of the road and entered the forest. He stopped when he found a small glade, and Alex dismounted.

The Knight of Alcea rummaged through his pack and pulled out a Federation uniform. He silently put it on while Bitsy watched from her perch on Kaz's head.

"That patch says you are in the 11th Corps," frowned the fairy. "That is not one of the armies that we will be visiting."

"It is what I have available," shrugged Alex. "It is the one I used to abduct Prince Harold."

"I remember," stated Bitsy. "You were Colonel Belasko, and I saved you from being killed. I put Captain Ergard to sleep just in time to save you from his sword."

"That you did," chuckled Alex. "And I am forever indebted to you for your help."

"That is what partners are for," beamed the little woman. "Tonight I shall save you again."

"That you will," smiled Alex, "but I have been thinking a bit on the way down here. I want to do more than just kill the mages."

"Just kill the mages?" balked the fairy. "As if that wasn't enough

for one night. What else can you hope to accomplish and still live to tell the tales?"

"I want to learn more about this fear spell," explained Alex. "Before you put the black-cloak to sleep, I want to see how it affects me and Kaz. That might be important information for the others."

"That is risky," frowned Bitsy. "What if all three of us are stricken with fear? We will be doomed."

"That is impossible," grinned Alex. "I heard that fairies are fearless."

Bitsy swallowed hard. "What if you heard wrong?"

"We will be careful," Alex promised as he turned more serious. "I plan to have a valid reason for approaching the mage tent, so they will not kill me right off. If you and Kaz are frozen, I will find a way to rescue you."

"Hmmph," pouted the fairy. "I am supposed to be saving you."

"Maybe that is the way it will turn out," replied Alex as he mounted Kaz. "You will remain apart from Kaz and me until we leave the encampment. Let's go."

Kaz turned and headed back towards the road. Bitsy shot up into the trees and disappeared. After riding a while, the southern end of the encampment came into view. The smell of smoke hung in the air, and there were trees felled across the road. A squad of Federation soldiers manned the barricade. The squad leader cautiously approached the barricade as Alex rode towards it. The Knight of Alcea could see archers nocking their arrows.

"You are a long way from home, Colonel," the squad leader said when Alex was close enough to see his patch. "Are you lost?"

"You're rather flippant, Sergeant," retorted Alex. "Has General Ritka forgotten how to train his men in the proper manner of addressing superior officers?"

The squad leader stiffened. "No offense meant, Colonel. It's just that someone from the 11th Corps is the last thing we expected to see tonight."

Alex sighed loudly and nodded. "Fair enough, Sergeant. I need you to direct me to the mage tent. I have business with one of the black-cloaks."

"Begging your pardon, Colonel," replied the squad leader, "but I do not have the authority to comply with your request. My orders are to admit no one."

Alex frowned. He had hoped to bluff his way past the barricade, but that obviously was not going to happen the way he wanted.

"Then get your captain out of bed," replied Alex. "I do not intend to sit here all night."

The squad leader turned and spoke softly to one of his men. The

chosen man turned and ran off into the night. Alex sat and pondered what approach he should take with the captain when he arrived. Before he could formulate a plan, a colonel rode up to the barricade.

"What are you doing here?" asked the colonel. "The 11th Corps has no part in the attack on Alcea."

"I have been sent to speak to one of your black-cloaks," answered Alex. "I am Colonel Belasko of the 11th Corps. Who am I addressing?"

"Colonel Pierce of the 21st Corps," answered the colonel. "Your visit is highly irregular, Colonel Belasko. May I ask the nature of your assignment?"

"It is of a highly-confidential nature to the Crown of Ertak," Alex replied. "I am not about to speak of such things here."

Colonel Pierce nodded understandingly. He spoke softly to the sergeant and the squad leader directed Alex to take the path into the forest to his left. Alex complied and soon found a narrow opening in the barricade. He passed through the opening and was met by Colonel Pierce.

"If you will follow me, Colonel Belasko, I will take you to where we can discuss your assignment."

Alex did not like the sound of the colonel's voice. He turned and saw soldiers closing the hole in the barricade. With a soft sigh, he nodded and followed the Spinoan colonel.

This is not going as I wished, Kaz. Be alert and stay ready to bolt at a moment's notice.

I am always ready to fight or flee as you wish, Alex.

Colonel Pierce led Alex to the large command tent and dismounted. Alex also dismounted, and a soldier came forward to take the reins of both horses. The guards pulled back the tent flap and Colonel Pierce led the visitor inside the tent. A Federation general sat inside the tent, and he looked up as the colonels entered. Colonel Pierce saluted the general and Alex mimicked him.

"What is this, Pierce?" asked the general.

"A visitor from the 11th Corps, General Ritka," answered the colonel. "I thought it best that you speak to him. He is Colonel Belasko."

The general waved Alex forward. The Knight of Alcea immediately complied, but his eyes scanned the interior of the tent as he walked across the room. The general noticed the visitor's gaze and frowned.

"You have a great deal of curiosity, Colonel," stated the general. "Have you never seen the inside of a command tent before?"

"I apologize, General," Alex replied as he openly looked around the tent again, "but I am sure that you will want to know why I am here, and I am hesitant to speak of such things openly. My mission is

confidential to the Crown of Ertak."

"This is a Spinoan operation, Colonel," replied the general. "While there is a contingent here from Aerta, there is nothing in this camp that would be of interest to the Ertakan Crown."

"Except your black-cloaks," declared Alex. "May we speak privately?"

General Ritka raised an eyebrow at the mention of the black-cloaks. He stared at the Ertakan colonel for a moment and then nodded. He waved dismissively at his guards and they retreated from the tent, but Colonel Pierce remained. Alex looked questioningly at the general.

"Colonel Pierce has my full confidence," stated the general. "This is as close to alone as you will get with me. We are, after all, in enemy territory."

Alex nodded in agreement and sighed. "Very well, but I must stress that word of my visit and its purpose must be kept confidential. It is a rather sensitive issue for King Harowin."

"We have no desire to embarrass the Ertakan king," assured the general. "What do our mages have to do with Ertak?"

"I am not sure how aware you are of the situation in Ertak," Alex began, "but there is bit of a rift between King Harowin and his son, General Montero. General Montero has kept his brother, Prince Harold, in a secluded castle in the Dark Forest. With General Montero marching off to war, King Harowin was eager to ensure that there is an heir to the throne of Ertak. As part of my duties for the king, I was dispatched to that castle to bring Prince Harold back to the Royal Palace of Ertak for his safety. I also took a group of black-cloaks with me to check on the health of Prince Harold. I believe one of those black-cloaks is now assigned to your command, and I need to talk to him."

"And you came all the way to Alcea to do so?" the general asked, his eyes narrowing as he gazed skeptically at the Ertakan colonel. "Why am I finding your story a little hard to believe?" Before Alex could open his mouth to reply, the general continued, "I pride myself on knowing the up and coming officers in the Federation armies, Belasko, and I have never heard of you before. I find it hard to believe that King Harowin would trust the life of his son to an unknown officer. Why are you really here, Belasko?"

Chapter 18

Day Six

Colonel Belasko stood in the command tent of Team Gortha, General Ritka staring at him in a very hostile manner. The general had made it clear that he did not believe Alex's story, and the Knight of Alcea felt the mission coming dangerously close to failure. He sighed anxiously and returned the general's stare with one of determination.

"I know little about your familiarity with up and coming officers," retorted Alex, "but I am proud of the rank that I have attained. As for why I would come halfway across the world and into a battle zone to speak to a mage, I do so because my king demands it, and I am loyal to King Harowin even unto the point of death. I have stated my request to speak to your black-cloaks. You are the leader of Team Gortha, and it is within your power to refuse me, but I think such a choice on your part would be unfortunate."

"Unfortunate?" snapped the general. "Who do you think you are to stand before a superior officer and threaten him?"

"I have issued no threats," Alex stated quickly. "I have not come here to cause harm to anyone, but I understand King Harowin better than most men. If I return to Farmin without resolution of this problem, King Harowin will take the matter directly to Emperor Jaar. Honoring the line of succession in the member countries of the Federation is a cornerstone of the agreement."

Deep furrows marred the general's brow as he stared at the Ertakan colonel. "What does talking to this mage have to do with the line of succession in Ertak? You said that you returned the prince to the Royal Palace. There is no threat to the throne."

"But there is," countered Alex. "The man that I returned to the palace was not Prince Harold. I need to find out how this is possible and whether the black-cloaks know where the real Prince Harold is."

The general stared dumbfounded at Alex. He suddenly tore his gaze away and looked at Colonel Pierce. "What is it, Pierce?"

"I might be able to shed some light on this," stated the Spinoan colonel. "While we were at Camp Destiny, I spent some time with Colonel Patrey. He serves under General Montero, and he did mention to me that Montero was quite upset about losing Prince Harold."

"Was Belasko's name mentioned?" asked the general.

The colonel nodded. "Very strongly, General. In fact, had Colonel Belasko inadvertently gone through the wrong portal tonight, I

guarantee that he would be dead by now. General Montero wants his head."

General Ritka's body lost the tenseness that had been evident during the verbal altercation. He sighed with relief and shook his head at Alex.

"You have made yourself a rather powerful enemy, Belasko. Montero is not the type of man to forget such transgressions easily."

"I understand, General," replied Alex. "I take no pleasure in hurting the Crown Prince, but I am sworn to carry out the orders of King Harowin. That is all I seek to do here tonight. May I carry out my orders?"

"Our camp layout is standard, Colonel," answered the general with a dismissive wave. "The tent will be on your left as you leave."

Alex saluted the general and turned to leave. Colonel Pierce also turned to escort the visitor, but the general spoke before they reached the tent flap.

"Let Belasko go on his own, Pierce," ordered the general. "As far as we are concerned, Belasko, we never heard of you, and this meeting never took place. I will not allow Ertakan escapades to put me between a king and a Crown Prince. I want nothing to do with it. Speak to your mage and then get out of my camp."

Alex nodded wordlessly and exited the tent. A soldier came out of the shadows and handed Kaz's reins to Alex. The Knight of Alcea headed towards the mage tent. As he passed into an area unlit by the torches lighting the tented area, he felt a slight weight upon his shoulder.

"I have tested the tent," Bitsy chirped softly. "I felt nothing. Fairies ARE fearless."

Despite the tension, Alex felt himself smiling. "I had no doubts about it," he whispered. "Now we shall discover if unicorns are as well."

Kaz snorted derisively. *Unicorns do not delude themselves. Fear is always present, but one can learn to control it.*

Alex left the unicorn's statement unchallenged, his focus already set on the flap of the mage tent, which was fast approaching.

"Keep watch, Bitsy," Alex whispered. "If anyone in the camp takes special notice of me, alert me immediately."

Without a word, Bitsy leaped into the sky and disappeared. Without conscious thought, the Knight of Alcea's steps altered slightly, his footfalls becoming silent. Kaz also changed his gait, and they approached the mage tent like a pair of wraiths in the night.

The first tingles of fear came over Alex subtly. It began as mere apprehension, which was to be expected under the circumstances. Alex would have never noticed it if he had not been specifically

analyzing his feelings with each and every step. The closer he got to the tent, the stronger the feelings grew. He felt his forehead dampen with perspiration, and his feet started to grow heavy with hesitation. Inside his body, he felt a tightening, as if a rope ran vertically through him and someone was twisting each end of the rope in a different direction. His hands began to curl into fists, and his jaw tightened. His breathing changed from a slow, steady rhythm to a shallow, halting pant. Kaz must have sensed the change in his partner.

Easy, friend. Do not let them tamper with your will.

Alex nodded and halted a few paces short of the tent flap. Needing to be silent, he concentrated on his breathing, forcing himself to take long, slow breaths until he felt in control again. He could do nothing about his sweating brow and the feeling of being wound tight inside, but he uncurled his fingers and flexed them. With slow, deliberate movements, he surreptitiously unsheathed his belt knife and stepped forward to the flap. When he reached the flap, he stood motionless for a moment, his senses acute. Time moved excruciatingly slow, but the Knight of Alcea refused to hurry his mission. He needed to know where the mage sentry was standing. Eventually, an audible sniff warned him that the sentry stood directly on the other side of the flap. With a speed honed over the years, Alex threw the flap open and stabbed out with his knife at chest level.

The black-cloak uttered a sharp intake of breath, but nothing more. The aura of fear instantly dissipated, and Alex knew that the mage was dead. Alex felt the weight of the man's body trying to drag down his arm, as his hand still clutched the knife. He stepped forward and supported the weight of the corpse, letting the tent flap close behind him. He eased the body to the ground and pulled his knife out of the mage's heart. He wiped the blade clean and sheathed the knife. Crouched in the darkness, Alex reached inside his uniform and extracted the myric quills.

The interior of the tent was not lighted, but the glow from the outside torches was sufficient to make out the sleeping forms of the black-cloaks. As silent as a stalking cat, Alex moved around the tent, delivering a poison death to each of the mages. In seconds, it was over. The Knight of Alcea let a sigh of relief escape his lips as he gathered the used myric quills. Bitsy unexpectedly landed on his shoulder.

"A colonel has exited the large tent," she reported. "He is not coming this way, but he is staring at this tent."

"Colonel Pierce," Alex said softly with a nod. "He is a curious one. He is probably wondering what I tied Kaz to. There was no post outside the tent. I think it is time to retreat."

"We have succeeded then," grinned the tiny woman. "I knew that

you would feel no fear."

"I felt it." Alex frowned as he stooped and buried the used myric quills. "It was very strong. I can easily see how Wylan and Sheri could have succumbed to such a spell. We will discuss it later. Now is not the time. Fly high and keep watch over Kaz and me."

The fairy darted into the darkness and disappeared. Alex walked to the flap and opened it. He exited the tent and turned before releasing the flap. He stood there for a moment, exaggeratedly nodding his head as if he were having a conversation with someone inside. When he finally closed the flap, he quickly mounted Kaz and turned towards the barricade. Colonel Pierce stood outside the command tent, watching the Ertakan colonel depart the camp. Alex nodded to the man, but said nothing. He continued riding calmly towards the barricade and freedom. The soldiers manning the barricade passed the colonel through without questions, and the Knight of Alcea rode southward along the Gortha-Trekum Road until the camp was out of sight. Once away from the camp, Alex halted and stared up at the lightening sky. Day six was dawning.

"Find Tedi and Natia," Alex instructed the fairy. "I need to talk to them before we return to Tagaret."

* * * *

General Gattas and General Montero rode together along the Coastal Highway north of Pontek in Sordoa. Both of the generals gazed at the burning village as they passed by, and neither of their faces held a smile.

"That is the fourth village with no boats," scowled General Gattas. "Someone is warning the villagers."

"Undoubtedly," agreed General Montero, "but Colonel Patrey assures me that the fishermen are not sailing north. Perhaps the villagers can see the smoke from the burning villages behind us."

General Gattas turned around and gazed southward, but he soon returned his gaze to the burning village and shook his head.

"The smoke is barely visible," stated General Gattas. "Besides, a distant burning village would not spur these fishermen to loading their families into those leaky boats and setting out to sea. They would only do so if they were aware of the reason for the other fires. It is preposterous to think that the Sordoans know that armies are marching up the coast. Someone must be spreading the word."

"Does it really matter?" sighed General Montero. "What if the Sordoans do know that we are coming? There is nothing that they can do about it. Look at our armies, General. We have enough might gathered around us to conquer all of Sordoa, and we are but a third of the force that will assemble before the walls of Trekum."

General Gattas looked proudly at his armies and nodded. Six files

of soldiers marched along the wide Coastal Highway, and three files of cavalry preceded and followed them. The column comprised of the 6th Corps and the 15th Corps stretched out for over two leagues. It was an awesome display of power, and General Gattas found himself agreeing with the Ertakan heir.

"I suppose there is little harm in fleeing fishermen," mused General Gattas, "but I prefer a clean operation."

"Perhaps we should send the forward scouts out even farther ahead," suggested General Montero.

"That shouldn't be necessary," replied General Gattas as he pointed north. "Once we come into the shadow of those cliffs up ahead, there will be no more villages for many leagues, and once we are past the cliffs, the route turns inland to meet up with Team Gortha."

General Montero gazed northward. The coastal plain gave way to steep towering cliffs that rose vertically to a height of several hundred paces. At the foot of the cliffs, the Coastal Highway continued northward on a narrow strip of land, but there was no other soil for citizens to build their homes on. The Ertak heir nodded as he realized that they were passing the last of the fishing villages.

* * * *

Southwest of the Lanoirian city of Chi, the 4th Corps of the Empire of Barouk marched along the banks of the Chi River. General Franz and Colonel Kerk rode side-by-side near the head of the column.

"You were right in your assessment, Kerk," said General Franz. "It is a beautiful country, and a bountiful one. The fields we have passed in just this first day in the country already surpass what I remember of Aerta. There is food enough here to fill a lot of bellies."

"And this continues for day after day," Colonel Kerk said. "I have never seen such rich fields, and I have seen most of the Federation."

"All of this will soon be part of the Federation, Colonel," smiled the general. "It will be a glorious addition."

Colonel Kerk's brow creased with concentration as he tried to think of a safe way to broach the subject that he wished to speak about. With an anxious sigh, he decided to just ask plainly.

"General," asked the colonel, "when this war is over, the Federation will need loyal people to rule over these new provinces. Has that been discussed at all in Despair?"

General Franz looked at his subordinate with a hint of surprise in his eyes. That very thought had been bouncing around the general's mind for the last hour, but he was sure that the colonel was asking the question for reasons of his own. He was not about to encourage the young pup to vie for a position that he coveted for himself.

"I am sure that only the most senior officers would be entrusted

with such provinces, Colonel, but do not despair. These new lands will open up paths of advancement that young men like yourself could only dream about a few years back. The armies of Zara will have great need for new generals as the Federation grows to encompass both continents."

Colonel Kerk frowned deeply. He should have suspected that General Franz would want such a rich province for himself, and being the leader of Force Lanoir, he would no doubt be given preference over others. While the general was indicating that Kerk might very well end up with his own army after the war, he would rather remain a colonel in Alcea than be made a general in Zara. There was nothing in the old land that he wanted to return to. Still, there were benefits to being a general.

"My only aspiration is to remain loyal to you, General," the colonel said with a forced smile. "Were you to become ruler over Lanoir, I would be honored to remain here with you."

General Franz blinked with genuine surprise. He had known Colonel Kerk to be an aggressive man. In fact, it was one of the traits that Franz admired in the young officer. One had to be aggressive to obtain what he desired.

"You would turn down your own army to remain my colonel?" scoffed General Franz. "I don't believe that for a moment, Kerk. What devious little plan are you hatching?"

Colonel Kerk reddened slightly at being so transparent. He smiled conspiratorially at the general.

"Were you to properly share in the spoils," the colonel began, "you should be rewarded according to your station. You are the leader of Force Lanoir and as such, the victory will be yours to claim, but the reward has to be more than just being made the commanding general of Lanoir. You are already that. You should rightfully be made King of Lanoir."

General Franz laughed. "And you wish to be my commanding general?"

"Who is better suited to serve you loyally?" grinned the colonel. "Would you accept the likes of General Somma?"

The laughter died in the general's throat at the mention of General Somma.

"That Spinoan coward," spat General Franz. "I curse Grand General Kyrga for saddling me with him. What did I do to deserve such a fate?"

"It had nothing to do with you," replied Colonel Kerk. "You gained Somma on your team because you have the upcountry prong of the attack. General Somma is deathly afraid of water."

"Is that why he is always patrolling deep in the Bloodwood?"

questioned General Franz. “Are you sure of this?”

“Positive,” declared the colonel. “I am friends with a colonel in the 16th Corps. He overheard Queen Samir complaining about Somma’s fear of water. She joked about sending Somma out to patrol the Isle of Despair.”

“A fitting punishment for an officer who holds such irrational fears,” spat the general. “You are a fine officer, Kerk. Stay loyal to me. I think you will be happy with the rewards for your loyalty.”

“Speaking of ill winds,” Colonel Kerk said softly as he nodded towards the rear of the column. “You are about to have a visitor.”

General Franz surreptitiously glanced towards the rear of the column. He saw General Somma and Colonel Rotti riding towards him. Without a word to Colonel Kerk, General Franz veered away from the column and rode towards the edge of the Chi River. Colonel Kerk moved out of the column and halted at the side of the road. General Somma rode towards General Franz, but Colonel Rotti halted alongside Colonel Kerk.

“What is going on?” Colonel Rotti asked as the colonels stared towards the river.

Colonel Kerk did not answer right away. He watched as General Somma cautiously approached General Franz. The Baroukan colonel smiled as he watched General Franz guide his horse down the slope of the bank and into the river. The Baroukan general turned and waved to General Somma.

“Come on down, Somma. I wanted to ask you something.”

The Spinoan general halted his horse on the riverbank, a safe distance from the river’s edge. “I will wait until you are done bathing.”

“Don’t be stubborn, Somma,” teased General Franz. “Get down here.”

“He won’t go down there,” Colonel Rotti said softly.

“I know,” grinned Colonel Kerk.

“You know?” gasped Colonel Rotti. “Does General Franz know? Is that the point of this game?”

“Calm down,” soothed Colonel Kerk. “Franz is only having fun with him.”

“It might be fun for you and General Franz,” frowned the Spinoan colonel, “but he is terrorizing General Somma. The general questioned me at length about the size of the Chi River after our journey here last fall. I assured him that it was a large river but that the trail kept well away from it. I can now see that my recollections were faulty.”

“There is nothing wrong with your memory,” replied Colonel Kerk. “The river is much wider than it was in the fall. It must be the spring runoff swelling the river.”

“It is more than that,” Colonel Rotti frowned as he nodded southward. “Coming over the last rise I saw a huge lake downstream. I am sure there was nothing like it last fall. That lake is the very reason General Somma and I rode forward. He wanted to see if he could talk General Franz into altering our route more inland.”

“You should know better than to even suggest such a thing,” replied Colonel Kerk. “This is the only decent road in the area, and we will be dependent on the supply caches to feed the armies. Even if General Franz was wiling to try a different route, he cannot. It’s simply not possible.”

“I didn’t suggest it,” sighed Colonel Rotti, “but Somma will probably say that I did. The truth is, he is petrified. He even avoids the Blood River back home and that is nothing like this one. I do not look forward to spending the next week in his company, and Franz’s humor will not help the situation any.”

With a sudden pang of guilt, Colonel Kerk nodded sympathetically. “Let me see if I can distract Franz long enough to get him out of the river.”

* * * *

General Fortella stood in a barn outside of Mya as the soldiers of the 2nd Corps of the Empire of Barouk raced through the portal. The soldiers suddenly stopped coming through the portal and the general eagerly watched the door. He smiled as his large black stallion was guided through the portal and led towards him. Almost immediately the race of soldiers through the portal resumed. General Fortella mounted his horse and rode out of the barn. Once outside in the morning sunshine, he paused to glance around and get his bearings. He had memorized the maps of Alcea and the sketches drawn by Tauman’s men, and he knew exactly where he was.

The Baroukan general spurred his horse to action and galloped across the fields to where Colonel Tamora was forming the army. The general did not interrupt as the colonel issued commands. He sat observing his men until the colonel was done. Colonel Tamora sensed the general behind him and turned when he was done.

“Any problems?” asked the general.

“None,” reported the colonel. “We should have a report back soon regarding the first day’s cache. Once we have that confirmation, the entire army will move past the rendezvous point. I am heading there now. Will you ride with me, or should I assemble a separate protection detail for you?”

“Let us ride together,” answered General Fortella. “I am anxious to see this Targa that we have been hearing so much about.”

A squad of soldiers formed around the two officers, and the group rode off to the east. Twenty minutes later they came to a group of

cavalry standing in the middle of the Mya-Tagaret Road. The cavalry patches were a mixture of the Baroukan 2nd Corps and the Aertan 24th Corps. General Fortella spotted General Whitman and he rode towards the Aertan general.

"Any trouble?" asked General Fortella.

"None, Force Leader," answered General Whitman. "If there is an enemy army in the area, they are remaining unseen."

"There is no enemy army between us and Tagaret, Whitman," stated General Fortella. "The only thing between us and our objective is eight long days of marching, and we will begin that momentarily. I sent a messenger to you early this morning with details of our formation, but I will go through them again now just to be sure we are clear on everything."

"I received the message and understand it, General," stated General Whitman.

General Fortella ignored Whitman and continued, "My cavalry will be the forward scouts and vanguard. The 24th Corps cavalry will be our rear guard. Inside those extremes, the 2nd Corps infantry will precede the 24th infantry. Both black-cloak contingents will ride together in between our two armies. Their presence has an adverse effect on the soldiers and placing them between the two armies will be the least disruptive place for them. The 2nd Corps will be responsible for erecting the camps. The 24th Corps will be responsible for disassembly, policing the grounds, and foraging should it become necessary. Do you have any problems with these instructions?"

"None whatsoever, General," replied the Aertan.

"Good," General Fortella smiled tautly. "Then we shall get along just fine, Whitman. The 2nd Corps will be setting the pace, and we will not slow down for stragglers. Make sure that the 24th Corps doesn't linger too far behind. You wouldn't want to be left isolated in enemy territory."

General Whitman swallowed hard as General Fortella turned his horse and started ordering his cavalry to move out.

Chapter 19

Day Seven

Two unicorns glided low over the Sordoan forest until they came to the coastal ridge between Pontek and Trekum. With powerful strokes of their massive wings, the unicorns rose up the western slope of the ridge and glided to a landing on the long, narrow crest. Tedi and Natia glanced around to get their bearings as scores of dwarves dropped their hammers and picked up their axes.

"Get back to your posts," growled a surly dwarf. "If you don't recognize Knights of Alcea when you see them, you need to report to a healer and have your eyes checked."

Natia stifled a giggle as the surly dwarf approached the Knights of Alcea.

"You're a mean one now, aren't you, Kroto?" greeted Tedi.

"It's the only tone some of these miners understand," laughed the dwarven magician. "If I wasn't here watching over them, they would probably be splitting open a keg of ale."

Natia glanced around in amazement. For as far as she could see in each direction, dwarves lined the crest of the ridge. Near each dwarf were two types of metal spikes in the ground. The larger type was very wide, and it tapered off as it got closer to the ground. Those spikes had been driven into the rock very close to the far edge of the crest. The smaller type looked like a large chisel except it had a hole bored through the top. The smaller spikes were sunk into the rock farther away from the edge of the crest and each one of them had a large coil of rope alongside it. One end of the rope had been passed through the hole in the chisel and tied in a knot. Kroto smiled when he saw what Natia was looking at, his large mouth splitting his broad face with a toothy grin.

"I think you'll be needing to talk to Prince Darok," said Kroto. "You've no doubt come to watch the show. Follow me."

Tedi and Natia dismounted and followed the dwarf mage. For several minutes they marched past the waiting dwarves, and Natia shook her head in amazement. Natia tried to count the number of dwarves that they passed, but she lost count when Kroto quickened his step.

"I'm sorry to point and run," apologized Kroto, "but I need to get back to my station. The call may come at any moment. Prince Darok is just ahead. Keep going."

“What is going on here?” Natia asked Tedi.

“I am not entirely sure,” admitted Tedi, “but Alex said we should see it. I gather it is some scheme that Alex and Prince Darok hatched up last fall.”

The Knights of Alcea continued onward until they came to a cluster of dwarves. Prince Darok was in the center of them, so the Knights of Alcea waited patiently for the gathering to break up. The wait was not long. Prince Darok clapped his hands with an air of finality, and the group of dwarves scattered, some of them racing past Tedi and Natia. The dwarven Knight of Alcea spotted Tedi and Natia and waved them to him with a sense of urgency. The gypsies ran to his side.

“So, you’ve come to see what evil lurks in the minds of dwarven sappers, eh?” chuckled Prince Darok. “You are just in time then.”

“What is going on?” asked Natia.

Prince Darok grinned broadly. “Take a wee peek over the edge, lass, but don’t be obvious about it. We don’t want to be tipping our hand just yet.”

Tedi and Natia both moved closer to the edge and peered down. Natia gasped. Several hundred paces below her, a huge Federation army marched along a thin strip of road at the base of the cliff. Beyond the thin strip of road was the Sordoan Sea. The army stretched as far to the left as she could see, and a fair distance to the right as well. Tedi pulled Natia back from the edge, and they returned to Prince Darok.

“General Gattas?” asked Tedi.

“And General Montero,” nodded Prince Darok. “Below is the 6th Corps and the 15th Corps in their entirety.” The dwarven prince turned slightly and pointed to his right. “If you can see that very last dwarf standing on the crest over there, he is waiting for the tail end of the army to pass him. When it does, he will give a signal to me. At the appropriate time, I will give the signal to attack.”

Natia looked again at the coils of rope next to each dwarf and frowned. “There are twenty-thousand men down there, Prince Darok. How many dwarves are up here?”

“Two-thousand,” answered the prince. “It’s hardly a fair fight.”

“I’ll say,” frowned Natia. “That’s ten-to-one odds. Are you sure this is wise?”

“It’s ten-to-one in our favor, lass,” laughed Prince Darok. “Lord Zachary did say that each dwarf was worth one-hundred men, didn’t he?”

“That was to scare the Spinoans,” scowled Natia. “You can’t possibly believe the lies he told the enemy.”

“Ah, lass,” Prince Darok sighed with mock offense, “your words

slay me. And here I thought King Arik thought highly of the dwarves."

Tedi started laughing, and Natia whirled to face him, anger building at his levity. Before she could verbally lash out at her husband, she felt Prince Darok's large hand on her shoulder. The dwarven prince was also laughing.

"I apologize, Natia," chuckled Prince Darok. "I shouldn't be having fun with you on such a serious occasion. We have no intention of merely jumping off the crest to fight the Federation. Let me explain."

Natia turned to stare at the dwarf, her face clouded with confusion.

"Down below," Prince Darok began, "the Federation army stretches out for over two leagues. They are indeed a formidable foe if my men met them on the battlefield, but that is not how the battle will go this day. I have had my sappers working on this ridge for almost half a year now. The entire face of the cliff has been undercut. When the signal is given, two-thousand dwarves will raise two-thousand hammers over their heads and bring them down on two-thousand metal wedges. When they do that, the face of this cliff will shear off and drop on the road below."

"Won't they have time to flee?" asked Tedi.

"No," answered the dwarven Knight of Alcea. "We have undermined the cliff for a length of three leagues. The length of their column in only a little over two leagues. Even if one of their riders bolted at the first sound of a hammer, he could not ride fast enough to escape the mountain falling on him. Nor could they save themselves by leaping into the sea. The height of this cliff is several hundred paces and a lot of that will land in the sea. There is no escape from this trap. There is only death for twenty-thousand invaders."

One of the dwarves caught Prince Darok's attention and the prince turned to see the end dwarf signaling him. He signaled back and then returned to his conversation.

"But the ropes?" questioned Natia. "What are they for then if not to rappel down and fight the enemy?"

"The ropes were used to undercut the face," explained the dwarf. "They have been left in place in case something goes wrong. As certain as I am that the sappers have done an excellent job, nothing is perfect. If there are pockets of Federation troops that survive, we will go down and finish them off."

"No prisoners?" asked Tedi.

"Not in this battle," answered Prince Darok. "My people have to rush from this battle to Hendy Valley where we will be pitted against a superior force led by General Ritka and General Stemple. We have no time to take prisoners and no place to put them. The only

exception will be for General Gattas and General Montero. If they survive, Kroto has orders to capture them. If they die, he will retrieve their heads. He is keeping pace with them now so that we don't have to search under all that rock to find them."

Prince Darok stepped away from Tedi and Natia and peered over the edge. He quickly stepped back.

"Send the word that the attack will begin in a few minutes," Prince Darok said to the closest dwarves.

The dwarves sent the message both ways along the line of dwarves.

"What about their mages?" asked Tedi. "Can they stop the attack?"

"Not with any magic that Kroto or Doryelgar know," answered Prince Darok. "We had planned to take out the black-cloaks last night, but we got word from Tagaret to alter our plans. I think we will be safe from their magic, but we will respond in kind if they surprise us. Now I must ask you to step back a little further. The ground is going to shake mightily, so you might want to get a good stance before I give the signal."

Tedi and Natia moved away from the edge and prepared for the ground to shake. With a sudden thought, Tedi stirred Button to life and told her what was going to happen. He asked her to record the attack for Tagaret to see.

The little blue woman leaped into the air and shot upward, angling over the sea. A moment later, a fiery arrow shot high into the air from some dwarf near Prince Darok. Button looked down and watched the Federation soldiers. None of them appeared to notice the arrow, but they all heard the sounds that followed. The sound of two-thousand hammers striking the wedges pealed like a monstrous bell, and every soldier glanced around nervously. Some of the soldiers chose to look upward. Those men saw the face of the cliff start to peel away from the ridge, and their shouts of warning rippled through the ranks of the Federation armies.

Panic and chaos gripped the hearts of the Zaran soldiers. Some soldiers jumped into the sea, and some tried to hug the face of the cliff, hoping the debris would somehow miss them, but most of the men remained frozen, staring up at the tons of rock cascading down upon them. The cavalries at the two ends of the columns raced away from the center of the armies in a futile attempt to avoid death, but as Prince Darok had said, none of them could outrun the collapsing mountain.

The rock wall screeched as it tore apart, and the ground rumbled noisily from the impact. The ground shook like an earthquake, and the tumultuous sea tossed waves high into the air. In seconds, it was over,

and a deathly stillness replaced the chaos. There were no cries from wounded men, no screams from trapped horses. The only sound was the crashing of the confused waves upon a new shoreline. As Button watched, a great massive cloud of dust spewed skyward, blotting out her view of the ridge. The fairy banked away from the mushrooming cloud before it enveloped her.

* * * *

Podil awoke to gentle raindrops falling on her face. She opened her eyes and stared at the angry sky overhead. It took her a moment to realize where she was, and when she did, she sat up quickly and looked around. Zalaharic knelt next to Wesik, his hands on the large unicorn. She frowned when Zalaharic did not acknowledge her rising, and she was sure that he would have heard her stir.

"Zalaharic?" she called softly.

"He has been like that for hours," Wylan said weakly. "I think he is in a trance of some kind."

Podil turned and stared at the Knight of Alcea. Wylan was sitting up at the edge of the glade, a mass of leafy material placed between his back and the tree that was supporting him.

"How are you feeling?" asked Podil.

"I have felt better," Wylan replied with a smile, but Podil could tell that the smile was forced and that the Knight of Alcea was in pain. "Still, I am alive so I guess I should not complain too much."

Lightning streaked across the angry sky and thunder shook the forest. Podil quickly erected a shield over the glade as she stood and looked around some more until her eyes landed on Sinora. The unicorn stood sleeping near the body of Sheri, which looked exactly the same as it did when Podil closed her eyes earlier. She continued to look around, but she could not find the fairy.

"Where is Thrip?" Podil asked Wylan. "We should send her off to Tagaret to let everyone know that you are alive. They thought you had perished."

"Zalaharic sent her to Caldar for supplies," answered Wylan. "He said that he needed more kioji and torafin."

Podil nodded silently. Kioji was used to replace lost blood and strength, and torafin was a pain killer. Podil had brought some of each with her, and she was sure that Zalaharic had as well. That fact that Zalaharic needed more of each was not a good sign. She knelt next to Wylan and gently leaned him forward. He did not protest, but he winced in pain. Podil pulled away the poultice and examined his back. She nodded with satisfaction and leaned Wylan back against the tree.

The clouds opened up, and a torrent of rain fell from the sky. The raindrops hit Podil's invisible shield and flowed over its surface and away from the glade. Podil glanced up at the storm as she moved

across the glade to Zalaharic's side. She knelt next to him and frowned, wondering how long he had been inside Wesik. With the storm overhead, she had no idea how long she had slept, so she reached out and touched Zalaharic. His skin was cold, too cold. Weighing the danger of waking Zalaharic or letting him remain inside the unicorn, Podil leaned forward and gently pulled on Zalaharic's wrists. The Elderal elf blinked and looked over at Podil. He sighed wearily and nodded to her as he pulled back from the unicorn.

"I hope my interruption was not poorly timed," Podil said softly, "but I was worried about you. Your body felt like ice."

"The internal damage is severe," Zalaharic said softly, "but you were wise to pull me out. These things should not be rushed, yet there are always others waiting for our skills. Tend to Wesik's flesh if you can. I need to rest."

Podil nodded as Zalaharic stretched out right next to the unicorn. He closed his eyes and immediately fell asleep.

* * * *

Alexander Tork opened his eyes and grabbed a knife from the table next to his bed. He quickly rolled off the bed on the side opposite the door and crouched behind it, the morning sun streaming through the window of his room in the Royal Palace of Tagaret. He had heard someone pause outside his door, or at least he thought he had. He was never quite sure if it was a dream or reality when such a sound woke him from a deep sleep. But the Knight of Alcea took no chances. He waited silently as the door slowly opened. With the knife held for throwing, he cocked his arm and prepared to strike. The door suddenly opened and Jenneva stood in the doorway. Alex sighed loudly and relaxed his arm. Jenneva looked across the room and raised an eyebrow at her reception.

"Do I need to knock when I return to my own room?" Jenneva asked as she entered the room and closed the door.

"Sorry," Alex apologized as he rose to his feet and put the knife back on the table. "I wasn't quite sure what had woken me. You were not here when I arrived last night. Is anything wrong?"

"Everything is wrong," frowned Jenneva, "but I am too tired to explain it all to you. Arik is holding a meeting right now in the library. Why don't you get dressed and attend the meeting?"

"Give me a hint," replied Alex as he started getting dressed.

"The plague has spread throughout the city," Jenneva said wearily, "and there are not enough healing mages to handle it all. Zalaharic seems to be missing, so I sent a fairy to Glendor. Galdan and some of his elves came to offer assistance, but I am not hopeful for a speedy solution to this problem. The short version of it is, the Targa army is too sick to fight. How did you make out in Sordoa?"

“Fairies and unicorns are not affected by the fear spell,” answered Alex. “I also think that knowing about the spell in advance can help a human to conquer it, but I would not suggest we use such a technique. It is a powerful spell. Was Arik angry that I flew off without telling him?”

“I have no idea,” answered Jenneva. “I have not seen Arik since before you left. I have been working day and night to heal those afflicted with the plague. And that is all I can say for now, Alex. I would not be here if I could still function decently. I need sleep desperately.”

“I understand,” Alex replied with a smile as he pulled back the covers for his wife. “I will check in on you later.”

Jenneva nodded and kissed Alex before sliding under the covers. Alex covered her up and quietly left the room. As he made his way through the corridors of the Royal Palace towards the library, he heard distant voices. The closer he got to the library, the louder the voices became, until he realized that there was shouting going on inside the library. Two Red Swords stood guard outside the library door, and Alex nodded to them in greeting.

“I would normally tell you that it is not a good time to enter the library,” quipped one of the guards, “but King Arik has been looking for you since yesterday. He is not in a good mood.”

“So I can hear,” frowned the Knight of Alcea. “Has this been going on long?”

“The meeting started promptly at dawn,” answered the guard, “so it has been going on for an hour now.”

Alex nodded to the guard and opened the door. The shouting immediately stopped and everyone in the room turned to see who was entering.

“And where have you been?” scowled the king. “I have been looking everywhere for you.”

Alex narrowed his eyes as he looked at the king. Arik was red in the face with anger, and harsh lines etched his face. Alex sighed deeply and closed the door. He turned and bowed to the Warrior King.

“I was in Sordoa, King Arik,” Alex replied formally. “I eliminated the black-cloaks from Team Gortha.”

“You what?” growled King Arik. “I gave specific orders that no one was to attempt sneaking into the tents of the black-cloaks. I will not be defied by anyone, Alexander Tork, not even you.”

“I did not sneak into the tent,” Alex replied calmly. “I posed as a colonel in the Federation army and had General Ritka’s permission to enter the tent. What is this all about? The shouting in this room can be heard through half of the palace. What is wrong?”

“The city is badly plagued,” answered Queen Tanya, “and that

includes the army. There will be no reinforcements when the Rangers and Red Swords go up against General Bledsoe and General Kozinski."

"And they are arriving at this very moment," snapped the king.

"What about the elves of Elderal?" asked General Gregor. "Perhaps we should divert them from Team Mya and use them against Team Miram."

King Arik spun around to face the general and started shouting at him. Alex did not quite hear the exchange despite its loud volume because Prince Oscar caught his eye. The prince was standing with his back against one of the bookshelves that lined the walls of the library, and he was signaling for Alex to join him. Alex nodded and casually made his way around the room to where the prince was standing. Alex was vaguely aware of more shouting in the room, but he wanted no part in such a meeting. Such decisions as the placement of armies should not be made at an emotional level, and that is what the meeting had devolved into. He stood next to Prince Oscar and pressed his back against the shelves.

"What is going on here?" Alex whispered.

"I fear for the king, Alex," Prince Oscar whispered back. "This is not my son talking. Arik would never belittle people as he has been doing. I have already spoken to Lord Clava about it, and he agrees. Something is very wrong here."

"Yet he is the king," Alex said softly. "We cannot simply send him to his room until he is feeling better. What are you thinking?"

"I don't know what to do," admitted Prince Oscar as he watched Queen Tanya slip out of the room. "My only hope is that he might listen to you."

"That might work when Arik is merely having a bad day," frowned Alex, "but this is something different altogether. Nothing I can say will get through to him in the state he is in. With his current mood, I would be thrown in the dungeon before I finished the first sentence. I have never seen him like this. When did this mood start?"

"It started this morning," answered Prince Oscar. "It came right out of the blue. He was surly and irritable from the moment he walked into this room. It hasn't gotten any better since."

Alex did not respond. He stood quietly at the edge of the room watching the king interact with the others. It was clear to Alex that the other advisors were growing weary of the constant bickering. Everyone looked as if they would rather be on a battlefield than in this meeting with the king. No matter what suggestion was offered, the king tore it apart, and his arguments were not gentle. Alex knew that nothing good was going to come out of the meeting. While he was observing the king, he noticed that Arik was wearing the new pair of boots that had been donated to him by a shoemaker. He frowned at

the significance of the boots. It meant that the king was going to make a public appearance, but that would be disastrous given the king's current mood.

"He is wearing the boots," whispered Alex. "Why?"

"He is planning to address the citizens today," answered Prince Oscar. "He thinks it is important to let the people know that the king is aware of their plight and doing everything in his power to find a solution. He really has to do it. The citizens will expect it."

"You can't let him do that, Oscar. He will end up shouting at someone, and the citizens will think the king has lost his mind. It will do more harm than good. Without the people and the army behind him, Alcea will be lost. Keep him inside."

"I cannot control him," frowned the prince. "He is of no mind to listen to me."

The shouting was louder than before and a loud slap reverberated through the room. Alex looked up in time to see Lord Markel take his hand off the book he had just slammed onto one of the tables.

"I did not come here today to be shouted at as if I were some young lad who stole something from the pantry," yelled Tedi's father. "We are supposed to be advising the King of Alcea, but it appears that the king has no need of our thoughts. I will take it no longer. I resign from the Council of Advisors effective immediately."

Lord Markel's face was bright red, and Alex knew that the man had reached the limits of his endurance. The noble bowed sharply to the king and strode angrily towards the door. As he passed by the king, Arik's hand streaked out and grabbed Lord Markel by the tunic. The king lifted Tedi's father off the floor, and shoved him into the wall. Books flew from the shelves as Lord Markel's body hit the wall.

"He does not know his own strength," Alex said to Prince Oscar with a sense of urgency. "He'll kill Alan. I do not know what will happen to me, but do whatever you have to do to keep Arik inside the palace today."

Prince Oscar opened his mouth to ask Alex what he was going to do, but the answer became immediately obvious. Alex ran towards the king. He leaped onto a table and dove across the room, wrapping his arms around the king and immobilizing him. Alex and Arik bounced off the wall and tumbled to the floor. Lord Markel fell on top of them and quickly rolled away. Alex lay on top of the king, and Arik's hands were pinned underneath him. The king tried to buck the Knight of Alcea off his back, but he could not.

"Lie still, Arik," grunted Alex. "I am not trying to hurt you."

"Hurt me?" spat the king. "As soon as I get up, you are going to wish you had stayed in Sordoa."

Chapter 20

The Angry King

The Council of Advisors collectively gasped as Alex tackled the king and held him to the floor. For a moment, no one moved or spoke. Eventually, Alan Markel rose to his feet, his hands trembling.

"Do not endanger yourself on my behalf, Alex," the noble said shakily. "Alcea needs you right now. The dungeons do not."

"Enough, Alex," pleaded General Gregor. "Let the king up."

Theos watched everyone with an uneasy feeling. While he had held a magical shield around the King of Alcea during his entire time in the library, it was clear that a simple physical attack had made his efforts worthless. He dropped the spell, as he wondered if he should intervene and remove Alex from his position on top of the king. The Knight of Alcea was not attacking King Arik. He was only holding him down, and he had not made a move towards a weapon. The Tyronian mage stood undecided.

The commotion had been loud, and the noise had not been contained in the library. The Red Swords that had been standing guard outside the library opened the door and charged into the room. They halted just inside the door as their eyes took in the scene. Alex saw the Red Swords enter, and he released the king and rose to his feet. King Arik pushed himself off the floor and leaped to his feet. His face was distorted with anger as he pulled the Sword of Heavens free from its sheath. Alex knew that he could not defend himself against the king without the Red Swords attacking, and he was not about to shed friendly blood to save himself. He immediately dropped to one knee before the king and bowed his head, putting his faith in King Arik. He could not have picked a worse time to have such faith in the Alcean king. King Arik raised the Sword of Heavens high over his head and brought it down with a vengeance.

Alex heard the shouted warnings and cries of protest. He looked up with confusion as he saw the king bringing down the Sword of Heavens. He closed his eyes and silently bid Jenneva farewell, but the blow never struck him. Instead he heard the clanging of a sword falling to the floor followed closely by the thud of a body. Alex opened his eyes and stared at the body of King Arik.

"Take Alex to the dungeons," ordered General Gregor, "and get a healer in here immediately."

The Red Swords stepped forward and seized Alex by his arms.

The Knight of Alcea offered no resistance as they dragged him to his feet and marched him out of the room. Konic Clava raced out of the room to get a healer.

"This meeting is over," announced Prince Oscar. "Everyone should leave the library now."

The advisors filed out of the room until only Prince Oscar and Theos were left. The prince stared at the Tyronian mage as if to ask if he had heard the order given to clear the room. Theos did not notice. His eyes were focused on one of the library shelves searching for something.

"What is going on?" the mage asked suspiciously.

"You should leave now," repeated Prince Oscar. "The king no longer needs any magical protection. If you are concerned about the king…"

"I am not concerned for the king's well being," Theos said calmly. "I have been a victim of that spell myself. Where is the fairy, and what is going on?"

Prince Oscar moved quickly to close the door and then returned to the king's side. He looked Theos in the eye and sighed.

"The king was going to kill Alex," explained Prince Oscar. "It would have been foolish not to stop it."

"If you had not dropped your magical shield," chirped Prince Midge as he moved from behind a book on one of the bookshelves, "a Knight of Alcea would have died here today. Why did you not put a physical shield around Alex to prevent his death? You saw what was happening."

Theos frowned at the question. It was a valid one, and the Tyronian mage examined his own actions, or lack of action. "I don't know," he admitted. "I thought about removing Alex from on top of the king, but I chose not to interfere as it appeared that no harm would come to the king. Perhaps I should have reevaluated things when the king became aggressive."

"The king has been aggressive all day," retorted Prince Midge. "There is something wrong with him. I am worried."

"How do you mean?" asked Theos.

"Arik and Alex have always been quite close," Prince Oscar replied. "It is unthinkable that either of them would hurt the other."

"But Alex did attack the king," frowned Theos. "Are they both mad?"

"Alex stopped the king from killing Tedi's father," stated Prince Oscar. "Arik may not have intended to hurt Alan, but he sometimes forgets how strong he is. That is all Alex tried to do."

Theos nodded with understanding. "I have been impressed with both Alex and King Arik, but I guess that I don't really know either

one of them very well. I did not realize that the king was acting uncommonly strange."

"Well, he is," declared Prince Oscar. "I think for now it might be better for everyone if it was not discovered that Prince Midge put the king to sleep. In Arik's current mood, that might cause a rift between him and the fairy people, and we have too many rifts as it is."

"How will you explain the king's fainting?" asked Theos.

"I will have him carried to his bed and let a healer examine him," smiled Prince Oscar. "He will be declared healthy and then go about his business. Nothing could be simpler."

"What about his address to the people?" asked the mage.

"That will not occur today," answered Prince Oscar. "In fact, it must not. Until we can determine what is truly wrong with Arik, we must keep him from creating more disharmony."

"I feel uncomfortable with this," admitted Theos. "We are manipulating the King of Alcea, and it is not our place to do so. He may make mistakes, but it is his province to do so, not ours."

"We are not trying to take authority away from the king," stated Prince Oscar. "We are trying to save his life."

"Are you saying that the king's life is in danger?" asked Theos.

"Absolutely," replied Prince Oscar. "I do not know the nature of his sudden irritability, but it is affecting many people in the city right now. Whatever it is, it is not natural."

Theos raised an eyebrow and suddenly seemed lost in thought. Before more could be said, the door opened. Queen Tanya and Jenneva entered the library with Red Swords behind them. The queen ran to Arik's side. Jenneva moved slowly to let the queen arrive first.

"What happened here?" asked the queen.

"Let the Red Swords carry the king to his chambers," suggested Prince Oscar. "I will accompany you and explain what I can on the way there."

Seeing that the king was alive with no visible wounds, the queen nodded and rose to her feet. Jenneva narrowed her eyes and looked around the room, pausing as her gaze fell on Prince Oscar, Prince Midge, and finally, Theos. Oscar realized that Jenneva suspected foul play, but she said nothing. The Red Swords hurried across the room and two of them lifted King Arik and carried him out of the library. The queen frowned as she bent down and picked up the Sword of Heavens.

"Start your telling, Prince Oscar," demanded the queen.

Prince Oscar told Tanya what had happened, only leaving out the fact that Prince Midge had cast a sleep spell on the king to save Alex's life.

"I don't know what is wrong with him today," sighed the queen.

“He was fine when he woke up, but by the time we reached the library, he was looking for a fight. I have never seen him like this before.”

The queen followed the Red Swords into the king’s chambers, but Jenneva stopped short of entering. She reached out and placed her hand on Prince Oscar’s arm to stop him outside the door.

“I do not know what game the three of you are playing,” she said softly, “but I have been up all night tending to the sick, and I need to get back to it as soon as possible. In the meantime, I need sleep. Now, tell me honestly, are my healing skills needed inside the king’s chambers?”

Prince Oscar shook his head and nodded towards Prince Midge on his shoulder. Jenneva shook her head, her lips pressed firmly together in a show of displeasure.

“Why?” she asked.

“To save Alex,” Prince Midge frowned. “I would have thought you would have been pleased that I kept him alive.”

“Arik would never hurt Alex,” retorted Jenneva, “and you know that, Prince Midge.”

“Arik would have killed Alex,” Prince Oscar said seriously. “Prince Midge did indeed save Alex’s life.”

Jenneva’s face clouded with concern. “Where is Alex?”

“General Gregor had him taken to the dungeons,” answered Theos. “He had, after all, attacked the king.”

“Get him out,” demanded Jenneva.

“I cannot,” replied Prince Oscar. “No doubt General Gregor informed the dungeon guards of the offense committed. They will only release him on the king’s orders. That is the law for an attack on the king’s body.”

“Oh, bother,” scowled Jenneva. “Come with me, Midge.”

Jenneva turned abruptly and entered the king’s chambers. Prince Midge darted from Prince Oscar’s shoulder to Jenneva’s shoulder just before she slammed the door shut. The queen looked up with a shocked expression.

“General Gregor has imprisoned Alex for attacking the king,” scowled Jenneva. “I will have no harm come to my husband, Tanya. Do you understand me?”

“He is my father, Mother,” frowned the queen. “I would not let anything happen to him. I will have him released immediately.”

“Prince Oscar says that only the king can have him released,” retorted Jenneva, “and frankly, Tanya, I do not trust Arik to do that, at least not in his current state of mind.”

Queen Tanya frowned and she opened her mouth to respond, but Jenneva gave her no opportunity.

“And before you say that Arik would not harm Alex, I just learned that the king tried to kill Alex in the library.”

“Who said such a thing?”

“Prince Oscar,” answered Jenneva, “and Prince Midge and Theos agree with his assessment. If you still have doubts, there were plenty of other people in the library.”

“What is going on, Mother?”

“I don’t know,” answered Jenneva, “but I am dead on my feet. I need sleep desperately, but I will not sleep if there is even a chance that harm will come to Alex. I need a solemn promise from you, Tanya.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to let Prince Midge keep Arik asleep until I wake up,” answered Jenneva. “That is the only way that I can be sure that Alex will still be alive.”

“Keep Arik asleep?” frowned the queen. “What do you mean by that? Is he not ill?”

“Tell her, Midge.”

The fairy prince squirmed on Jenneva’s shoulder, but the queen’s demanding stare required him to answer.

“I put the Bringer to sleep to stop him from killing Alex,” confessed Prince Midge. “It was the only thing I could think of.”

Queen Tanya sighed deeply and shook her head. “All right,” she agreed. “I will let Prince Midge keep Arik asleep, but things are getting way out of control around here. Mother, you will come here as soon as you wake up and then we will all discuss this problem.”

* * * *

As the 21st Corps of Spino marched northward along the Toulane River in Sordoa, a corporal rubbed his eyes and glanced once more at the ridge to his west. He thought he had seen the sun glint off of something metal, and he searched the ridge to find it again. When he did find it again, he gasped and his step faltered. The man behind the corporal bumped into him and the column began to unravel. Shouts and curses alerted the squad leader of a problem, and Sergeant Turang stepped out of the column.

“Chitor, out!” shouted the sergeant. “The rest of you close up the column.”

The corporal stepped out of the column and strode dutifully towards the sergeant.

“What is your problem, Chitor? Is walking too difficult for you? Should I ask General Ritka to let you use his horse?”

“I am sorry, Sergeant,” apologized the corporal, “but we have problems.”

“You have problems,” scowled Sergeant Turang. “Don’t try to

make them mine."

"Turn around slowly," Corporal Chitor said softly. "Up on the ridge you will see a glint of light. Tell me what you see."

The sergeant turned around casually and glanced up at the ridge. At first he saw nothing, and he was about to berate the corporal some more, but just as he was about to give up searching for whatever he was supposed to see, a glint of light struck his eye. The sergeant focused on the source of the glint.

"What is it?" the sergeant said softly.

"It's a dwarf," the corporal replied nervously.

"Be serious," scowled the sergeant. "You wouldn't know a dwarf if one bit your sister. What makes you think it is a dwarf?"

"What else could it be?" asked the corporal. "It's short and stocky just like they are supposed to be"

"It could just be a small person," frowned the sergeant. "I think you let those rumors get the best of you. There are no dwarves."

"Look at the axe," retorted the corporal. "That thing is twice as big as the dwarf. Do you really think a short man would be able to lift such a thing? It's a dwarf I tell you."

"Then dwarves are pretty stupid," countered the sergeant. "If he was trying to spy on us unseen, he failed miserably. I bet a good bowman could hit him with one shot from here."

"Stupid?" scoffed the corporal. "He is not trying to remain unseen. Neither of us saw him until he tilted that huge axe to catch the rays of the sun and send them towards us. He wants to be seen."

Deep furrows creased the sergeant's forehead. Chitor was right on one point. The sergeant would have never seen the dwarf if the sunlight had not reflected off the axe, but why would he announce his position when he could remain hidden?

"Why?" asked the sergeant.

"He is taunting us," answered the corporal. "He is telling us that the dwarves are not afraid of us."

"Well I know how to wipe that smile off his face," scowled the sergeant as he turned back towards the column and scanned the ranks of the approaching soldiers.

He saw the next company coming, and he waved to the captain. The captain stepped out of the column and approached the sergeant.

"What is it, Sergeant?"

"If you look over my shoulder, Captain," Turang said softly, "you will see a dwarf watching the column. This is an opportunity for you to have your best archer score the first kill in Alcea."

The captain gazed up at the ridge, and his face darkened with anger. "Do you think it is funny to try to make a fool out of me, Sergeant?"

“No,” balked the sergeant as he spun around and gazed at the spot where the dwarf had been. “He was there just a moment ago. I swear it. Ask Corporal Chitor here. He saw it first.”

“Nice try, Sergeant,” the captain smiled thinly. “Just to show you that I do have a sense of humor, I will speak to your captain at camp tonight. I will request that he lend us your talents to handle latrine duty for my entire company. Now, find your spot in the column and return there immediately.”

The captain turned and headed back to the column.

“Great,” scowled the sergeant. “That sure made me look like a fool. Let’s get back in line before he decides on more punishment.”

The two men hurried forward to retake their assigned places in the column, but they talked as they walked.

“Do you think the dwarves were responsible for killing the black-cloaks?” asked the corporal.

“No,” replied the sergeant. “I heard it was an assassin.”

“An assassin,” scoffed the corporal. “Do you really think a lone man could enter our camp and assassinate eight battle mages? I think that is a story made up so that the rest of us don’t get scared. I bet the dwarves did it.”

“And you think it would be easier for dwarves to sneak into camp?” chuckled the sergeant. “I think you are deranged.”

“The dwarves probably have mages of their own,” retorted the corporal. “They could probably crush this entire column any time they wanted to. I think they are just toying with us.”

“Shut up!” snarled the sergeant. “I don’t want to hear any more about dwarves.”

* * * *

Prince Garong sat on the grass with a fairy standing on his knee. The Knight of Alcea stared at the image that the fairy was creating and shook his head.

“He should be looking directly into my eyes,” said the Elderal prince. “And keep his speech short. Your images of him are limited, so use as few phrases as possible to get your point across.”

Sprout frowned deeply, his tiny green head slowly shaking side-to-side. “It would help if you could just tell me which images to display.”

A female elf stood at the edge of the glade shaking her head. “You are wasting your time, Garong. We should just sneak into their camp at night and kill the mages.”

“Nothing would please me more, Rhula,” frowned the elven prince, “but Valon has forbidden it. He is afraid that their spell of fear will cause more deaths and alert the enemy to our methods.”

“Alert the enemy?” scoffed Princess Rhula. “Every day that

passes, General Fortella and his army get a day closer to Tagaret, and the elves of Elderal are the only thing in his way. If we are to try to slow down his army, we have to eliminate the black-cloaks first. We do not have time for fairy games."

"Valon's word is law," retorted Prince Garong. "When King Arik says not to enter their tents at night, we will not enter their tents at night. There is no point in arguing about this."

"Then a lot of elves are going to die this week," scowled Princess Rhula.

The elven princess turned and disappeared into the trees. Sprout turned and faced Prince Garong with a hurt look on his face.

"Fairy games? I don't think the princess cares much for me."

"Nonsense," smiled Prince Garong. "Rhula treats everyone that way. Do not take it personally. She almost killed Valon one day, but that was before we knew who he was."

"You mean the Bringer?" asked Sprout.

"Yes," answered the Knight of Alcea. "We call King Arik Valon, just as you call him the Bringer. Now, let's try this again."

"I think part of the problem is that I have not seen that many priests," frowned the tiny, green man, "and none of them spoke much while I was watching them. I cannot add words that I never heard him speak. Perhaps another fairy could do better, one who has seen and heard many priests. Such a fairy would have a large remembrance and be able to piece together the snippets required for this task."

Prince Garong smiled sympathetically. He knew that Sprout felt inadequate for the task, but there was no time to gather other fairies and audition them. They had to kill the black-cloaks today, or they would not be able to slow the march from Mya to Tagaret enough to make a difference.

"You can do this, Sprout," the elf said assuringly. "We just have to find the right combination of remembrances. Let's start again. Show me what you remember, and I will pick out what we need."

* * * *

Morgora was bored. As a black-cloak attached to General Fortella's 2nd Corps, he found the pace of the march agonizingly slow and the opposition nonexistent. Even the training marches back in Zara were more eventful. On the training marches there had been locals to harass and intimidate, but they had not seen a single Alcean since coming through the portal. Hoping that they would run across a lone trapper or hiker to have some fun with, Morgora kept scanning the forest on both sides of the road. When he finally did see someone in the trees, the sight was not one that he had expected.

Standing well off the road where he was hard to see, K'san stared at Morgora and beckoned the black-cloak to come to him. It was an

unusual request as the priests never mingled with the army as the black-cloaks did. Morgora was intrigued and a little bit thankful for the diversion. Without a word to the others, the black-cloak turned his horse to the side of the road. As the column continued past him, the black-cloak rode into the forest until he reached the area where he had seen the priest. He frowned when he found K'san standing in the midst of a large thicket. There was no way to approach the priest.

"Your appearance here is quite unusual," Morgora said in a way of greeting. "What did you want?"

"You are to come to me tonight," replied K'san. "Bring your brothers, but no one else is to know of this meeting. North of the camp. Less than a league. Go now."

Morgora's brow creased heavily. "What is this about? Why are we to sneak out of the camp without telling anyone?"

"Return to your task," replied K'san.

The priest's eyes moved as if they were focusing on something behind Morgora. The black-cloak turned to see what K'san was looking at. He saw nothing but trees. When he turned back to ask the priest about the need for secrecy, K'san was gone.

Morgora turned his horse and headed back towards the column, but he was no longer bored. The priest had said very little, but his appearance in the forest and the need for secrecy spoke volumes to the black-cloak. It was obvious to Morgora that K'san had a need for the black-cloaks, and that sounded exciting, certainly more exciting than anything that had happened since coming through the portal. The more Morgora thought about the priest's words, the more curious he grew. The need for secrecy indicated that either he did not trust General Fortella, or the 2nd Corps had been infiltrated. Either way, Morgora felt that exciting days were just around the corner.

Chapter 21

Unexpected Surprise

It was a bright sunny morning in Tagaret, and Sergeant Skyler whistled as he walked the streets of Tagaret. He sported a wide, friendly smile, and he nodded in greeting to everyone he passed. Less than a block from the Royal Palace, the sergeant entered a small shop and purchased a tin of pipe tobacco. He dallied in the shop for a few moments, discussing the state of the city with the shopkeeper. Both men expressed concern about the plague spreading through the population, and each of them remarked about the levels of incivility that appeared recently. It was the typical type of conversation that one would expect between two citizens, and the sergeant was careful as always not to discuss matters best left inside the Royal Palace. As an aide to the head of the Alcean army, Sergeant Skyler knew not to speak of such things in public.

The sergeant's next stop was the shoemaker's shop to pick up a pair of boots that he had left to be repaired. A tiny bell rang as he entered the shop. The sergeant closed the door and looked around the dimly lit shop. Thousands of pairs of shoes and boots filled the store, attesting to the large volume of customers that the shoemaker had managed to attain during his short time in the city. The curtain at the rear of the shop moved and an old man shuffled through the opening.

"Good morning," smiled Sergeant Skyler as he approached the counter where the shoemaker transacted his business. "I left a pair of boots to be repaired. You said that they would be done this morning."

"And so they are," smiled Artimor. "Wait right here while I get them."

The sergeant watched the old man disappear through the curtain before realizing that he had not mentioned his name, and the shoemaker would not know which pair of boots to retrieve unless he at least identified himself. He opened his mouth to shout his name so that the old man could hear him, but he said nothing and frowned deeply. He saw Artimor out of the corner of his eye, and the shoemaker was not behind the curtain at all. He was in the main room of the shop slightly to the sergeant's left. Sergeant Skyler shook his head in confusion. He could have sworn that he saw the shoemaker go through the curtain, but that obviously could not have happened.

The bell at the door sounded again and a man walked into the shop. The sergeant heard Aritmor's voice welcoming the new

customer, and he turned towards the sound. Artimor smiled at the sergeant and pressed a pair of boots into his hands.

"I think you will like the workmanship that I put into these boots, Sergeant Skyler," Artimor said. "I enjoyed working on them. Make sure to tell your comrades who it was that did such fine work."

The sergeant stared at his boots. They were not only repaired well, but they looked as good as a new pair of boots would. He was pleased with the work.

"An excellent job," agreed the soldier. "How much do I owe you?"

"You owe me nothing," smiled the shoemaker. "You young lads put your lives on the line to keep the rest of us safe. The least I can do is repair your boots for free. Anyone who serves in the army will get free repairs from me as long as I am alive. Go tell your comrades."

The sergeant's jaw dropped as he stared at the shoemaker. He had heard rumors in the barracks about free repairs from the shoemaker, but he had not believed them. Such a thing was unheard of in Tagaret, but to be honest with himself, the sergeant had to admit that the rumors had caused him to try the new shoemaker's services. He had hoped for a discount, but he was ecstatic to find the rumors confirmed.

"I do not know how to thank you," gushed the sergeant. "For a new merchant, you are the most patriotic one that has ever graced our city. Thank you."

Artimor smiled broadly and nodded to the soldier. He then dismissively turned his attention to the new customer. The sergeant left the shop with a grin on his face, and the new arrival turned and watched him leave with a sneer on his lips.

"I guess I should tell you that I am also a soldier," quipped the new customer. "My uniform is being cleaned today."

"I am sure that you are," the shoemaker replied sarcastically. "Let me get your boots, Fletcher."

The Snake immediately tensed at the mention of his name. Any man who knew his name and also favored the soldiers of Alcea was a threat to the Snake, and Fletcher did not leave threats around to endanger him in the future. A knife slid into his hand as the shoemaker moved behind the curtain to get the boots that had been left for repair. Fletcher thought about going through the curtain and attacking the shoemaker in the back room in case another customer entered the shop, but he hesitated. The Snake could not be sure if the shoemaker had confederates in the rear of the shop. He would wait for Artimor to return with his boots. Unexpectedly, Fletcher felt his fingers open. The knife slipped from his grasp and fell to the floor. As the Snake bent over to pick up the knife, he saw a boot step on it. He looked up and saw Artimor looking down at him.

“I think your knife must have fallen out of your sheath,” Artimor smiled tautly. “I do fine leather work on sheaths as well as boots. Why don’t you remove the sheath and leave it with me? I will repair it for you.”

Fletcher rose slowly and backed away from Artimor. He was certain that it was not possible for the shoemaker to have moved through the curtain to step on his knife without the aid of magic. Artimor was far more than he seemed to be, and that made the Snake very nervous.

“I would be pleased to have you mend it,” Fletcher replied fearfully. “This is not the first time that it has happened. Did you find my boots?”

“The boots were not lost,” quipped the Claw of Alutar as he stepped off the knife and moved behind the counter. “They are sitting right here on the counter waiting for you to pick them up.”

Fletcher moved forward and picked up his knife. He made a show of sliding it back into its sheath and then kept his hands well away from it.

“Why are you wasting your time mending shoes?” asked the Snake. “I could find more useful endeavors for a man of your talents.”

Artimor laughed. “You have no idea what my talents are, Fletcher, but I know what yours are. The Snakes are nearly worthless. You have failed in every attempt to kill the Warrior King and his Knights of Alcea. Don’t even think of trying your hand against me again. I will not be so benevolent the next time.”

Fletcher’s eyes opened wide in horror. “Who are you?’ he gasped. “And why do you favor soldiers if you are an enemy of the king? That makes no sense.”

“Perhaps to your feeble mind,” mused the demonkin. “Sergeant Skyler is an aide to Colonel Borowski. As such, he carries a wealth of information around in his head, information that is important to the Federation. Is it not worth a bit of leather and a few seconds of time to secure such information?”

Fletcher noticed that Artimor ignored his first question, and he knew that it was not a casual omission. He also realized that the sergeant would not volunteer such information for a free boot repair. That meant that Artimor had the power of a K’san to reach into people’s minds and take what he wanted. That also explained how he knew so much about Fletcher and the Snakes, yet he did not seem threatening any more.

“If you shared such information with me,” posed Fletcher, “my people might be able to make use of it.”

“Your time has come and gone,” replied Artimor. “Not only has the Federation started the attack, but the Alceans appear to already

know about it, even though all of the armies have not yet left Zara. What bothers me is that they do not seem panicked by the news, and they should be. Why do you suppose that is?"

Fletcher had not even received word that the attack had started, and the priest usually kept him informed. That the Alceans already knew surprised the Snake. It would mean increased danger for Fletcher and the others because the Federation soldiers would kill everyone without a thought of their loyalty to the Federation. He had to inform Tedesco and the others.

"Forget about Tedesco," scowled Artimor. "Can you not think beyond your own selfish ends?"

Fletcher gasped. The shoemaker was reading his every thought, even as he was thinking them. He swallowed hard.

"What can we do to help?" asked the Snake.

"Forget about the others," instructed the shoemaker. "Get a horse and ride like the wind. Go to your priest and tell him what I have told you. If K'san has a lick of sense, he will have his master send more soldiers through the portals to bolster the Federation forces. Warn him that there must be a spy among the planners of the attack, someone with enough knowledge to specify the locations of the portals and the timing of the attacks."

Fletcher nodded exaggeratedly and reached for his boots. The shoemaker reached for the boots before the Snake could. He tossed them on the floor behind the counter.

"You will not need those," stated the demonkin. "Just get a horse and race to K'san."

Fletcher nodded wordlessly and fled from the shop. He purposely kept his thoughts jumbled until he was outside on the city street. Only then did he reflect on his encounter with Artimor. He trembled as he remembered the shoemaker's words and attitude. Artimor had spoken of K'san and the priest's master as if they were not his concern. In Fletcher's mind, that made Artimor an extremely powerful force, and the Snake was not comfortable in the company of such people. He was suddenly glad to have been given a task that would take him far away from Tagaret. He would think hard and long before he decided to return.

* * * *

General Bledsoe strode through the portal and into the barn in Miram. His personal detail immediately formed around him, and they moved out of the barn in a group. The barrel-chested general halted as he stepped fully into the morning sunshine. His bright eyes scanned the farm, instantly taking in the activities of 7th Corps of Barouk. He nodded in satisfaction, his long, brown beard swaying rhythmically. Within moments, Colonel Sawar noticed the general and ran towards

him to report.

"We are right on schedule," declared the colonel. "Your horse will be brought to you shortly. Would you care to review the defenses?"

"No, Colonel," replied General Bledsoe. "You seem to have everything under control. Hold up the first company of cavalry until my horse arrives. I will be joining them for the journey to the rendezvous point."

"We are in enemy territory now," the colonel warned gently. "We would not want to present the Alceans with a symbolic victory."

The general smiled paternalistically at the colonel. "The Alceans will claim no victory from Team Miram, either symbolically or otherwise. A company of the empire's finest cavalry is more than a match for anything the Alceans would have this distance from their walled capital. My safety is ensured, and I want to be at the rendezvous point to welcome General Kozinski and to discuss marching orders with him."

Colonel Sawar nodded and saluted smartly. "I will see that your horse is brought to you promptly."

The colonel raced away, and General Bledsoe continued his observance of the men under his command. He was pleased with what he saw. Within minutes the general's horse was brought to him, and Bledsoe dismissed the group assigned to guard him on the farm. He mounted his stallion and rode swiftly across the farm to where the cavalry was forming. A young captain saluted him and quickly issued instructions for his riders to form a protective shield around the general. The general smiled as he noted the efficiency of the company.

"You were prepared for me to join you on the journey to the rendezvous point?" asked General Bledsoe.

"Colonel Sawar informed me just a few minutes ago," admitted the captain. "It is an honor to have you ride with us, General. Are you ready to leave?"

"More than ready, Captain," answered the general. "I am anxious to reach the rendezvous."

The captain needed no stronger hint of the general's desire to move with haste. He called the company to order and instructed them to move out. The captain personally took the point and led the company along a narrow trail leading towards the main road. The company moved quickly along the trail, but not haphazardly. The general noted with pride that the riders constantly scanned the sides of the trail as well as the trail before them. The riders were alert and as quiet as a swift-moving company of cavalry could be. Within minutes they reached the rendezvous point, and the captain issued orders to his men to define a perimeter and maintain it. The general dismounted and waited for the vanguard of the 17th Corps of Spino.

He did not have long to wait. When it did arrive, he was pleasantly surprised to see General Kozinski among the first riders. He respected the Spinoan general, but he had not thought that the Kozinski would take such a risk. It gave him more confidence in the plan he had in store.

"Right on schedule," General Kozinski greeted the team leader.

"Any problems?" asked General Bledsoe.

"None," replied the Spinoan general. "The Alcean countryside is quiet this morning. Shall I have my army fall in behind yours?"

"For now," answered General Bledsoe, "but I want your army to remain intact as a separate unit. There will be no mixing of cavalry or infantry units. Even your battle mages will remain separate from mine. The formation you choose for your army is up to you."

General Kozinski returned a questioning gaze at the Baroukan. "I have no problem with your orders, General, but I must confess to being curious about the reason for them."

"We are not one army, but two," answered General Bledsoe. "I know most team leaders would look upon such a joining as doubling his forces, and there is nothing wrong with that, but I tend to think there might at times be an advantage in having two forces capable of maneuvering on their own. You will retain leadership of the 17th Corps, General, but you will also obey my orders. It will be up to your discretion to fulfill my orders as you see fit. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

General Kozinski smiled and nodded. He knew that General Bledsoe was paying him a compliment, and it pleased him. The Baroukan general was known within the Federation as a bulldog in battle, and Kozinski had been apprehensive about serving under him. In fact, he had taken a bit of ribbing from other generals. They had joked about Bledsoe using the 17th Corps as sacrificial fodder while the bulldog sunk his teeth into the enemy's side. He could see now that the taunters had been misinformed. It was an unexpected surprise.

"You honor me, General Bledsoe. I will endeavor never to disappoint you."

* * * *

Long shadows melted away into an overall gloom as the fading light of day fled from the forest north of the Mya-Tagaret Road. The Elderal elf who ran swiftly through the forest, gauged his footsteps carefully, refusing to let a single errant sound betray him. He reached the meeting spot well before the horsemen.

"They are coming, Prince Garong," the elf runner reported softly.

"All eight of them?" asked the Knight of Alcea.

The elf runner merely nodded.

"What of the soldiers?" asked Princess Rhula. "Are the mages escorted?"

"They come alone," answered the elf runner.

The elven princess raised an eyebrow. "I will admit that I am surprised, Garong, but this mission is still foolishly risky. Those men are battle mages. You have to expect them to be shielded. After our arrows fail to slay the black-cloaks, they will unleash their battle magic on us. Everyone here will die. Is this how you want to be remembered by our people?"

"I am not here to generate memories for future generations of Elderal," retorted the prince. "I am here to ensure that the Elderal have a chance to have future generations. Rhula, the time to discuss this is long past. I am committed to see this through, but you bring up a valid point. The Elderal need an heir. It serves no purpose for both of us to remain here within danger's grasp. Leave now and with haste. Mother would never forgive me for endangering both of her children needlessly."

"So, you do acknowledge the risk in your plan," Rhula replied with a grin of victory. "That pleases me, but I am not one to abandon my brother in his hour of need. I can place an arrow as well as any of your men. Where do you want me?"

Prince Garong sighed and smiled at the same time. "Behind the enemy. We do have a fallback plan, and that is the most critical part of this mission. If the mages are not shielded, we will not need expert archers, but if they do erect physical shields, every arrow will count. Circle around behind the black-cloaks. One of my men will explain what is to happen. Be quick. They will arrive in just a few moments."

The elven princess faded into the growing darkness, and Sprout glided down out of the trees and landed on Prince Garong's shoulder.

"Some of the mages are leery and some are not," reported the fairy. "I would be surprised if none of them erected a physical shield. I think we must go with the fallback plan."

Prince Garong hesitated to respond. He was loath to use the backup plan unless he needed to, but he suspected that Sprout was correct in reading the moods of the black-cloaks. He used precious moments pondering in silence before eventually nodding to the fairy.

"All right," the prince said. "I hope you are quick to adapt because I am adding lines to your speech. I do not want to have to deal with horses and mages in one big tangle. That will make it almost impossible for our archers. Your task is to get the mages to dismount before approaching the trap zone. Can you do that?"

It was the fairy's turn to hesitate, but he eventually nodded affirmatively. "The priests are not fond of horses. Or should I say that

horses fear the priests? Either way, I can do it."

"Then do it," Prince Garong said in a whisper. "I hear them approaching."

The fairy did not take the time to respond. Sprout shot off of the elf's shoulder and up into the trees. A moment later the image of K'san appeared in the failing light. Prince Garong faded into the trees and passed the word that the mission had changed.

Morgora saw K'san and he altered his path towards the priest. The demonkin suddenly raised a hand to halt the mages.

"Dismount," the priest said simply.

Morgora immediately complied, but not all of the black-cloaks did.

"Why are we dismounting?" frowned one of the mages. "I don't like this."

"Dismount," repeated the demonkin.

"Get off your horses," Morgora scowled quietly. "For horses, his aura is worse than our Spell of Fear. Shield yourselves if you think that a demonkin would harm you."

"I've been shielded since leaving the camp," retorted one of the black-cloaks, "and it has nothing to do with K'san. We are in enemy territory. Only a fool would travel unprotected."

The eight battle mages dismounted and walked forward to meet with K'san. Each of them was curious about the purpose of the clandestine meeting, and more than one of them was suspicious. When the mages had covered twenty paces of the way to the priest, K'san held up his hand again. The mages halted.

"What game is he playing at?" scowled one of the mages. "I am of half a mind to turn and leave. We are not under the direction of a priest on this mission. We serve General Fortella."

"Perhaps we are about to be advised differently," suggested another mage.

Suddenly, bowstrings sang through the forest, and K'san instantly disappeared.

"Trap!" shouted Morgora. "Shields up!"

There was no time for erecting shields. Three of the black-cloaks fell immediately, Morgora being one of them. The other five black-cloaks had already protected themselves with physical shields, and they immediately fell back on their training, their eyes scanning the forest for targets. This was the moment that Rhula had feared when she argued with her brother, but she had not known about the backup plan then. Loud cracks split the forest in four different directions. The mages zeroed in on the sounds and prepared to shower the area with offensive spells, but they never got the chance. The sharp cracks had been the severing of the tie downs for a large net. The netting sprang

up from under the debris on the forest floor and rose quickly towards the canopy. As the mages were jumbled together in the swiftly rising trap, more arrows shot through the trees. Unlike the prior arrows that had bounced off the invisible shields, these new arrows struck flesh as the mages momentarily lost their focus on the protection spells. Before the net reached its zenith, the black-cloaks were all dead.

The Elderal elves quickly verified the kills and prepared to abandon the area in case a Federation patrol came searching for the missing mages. Princess Rhula pulled her brother aside and silently hugged him.

“You always surprise me,” she said softly as she broke the embrace. “What made you think they would be vulnerable?”

“While I was in Tagaret, I spent some time with an elven mage from Glendor,” answered Prince Garong. “One of the things Galdan told me was that a battle mage always needs his concentration. If you can disrupt him severely enough, he will lose his shields, but only for a second. Shields are almost instinctive for battle mages, and they can quickly construct them within a second, but it does leave a tiny window of opportunity open for attack.”

Chapter 22

Unnatural Emotions

Queen Tanya bent over the corporal and examined him again. She frowned heavily and slowly shook her head. The corporal looked up at her, adoration in his eyes.

“You don’t have to worry about me, Queen Tanya. I am feeling much better now. Spend your energy on those less fortunate.”

A smile formed on the queen’s lips as she shifted her glance to the corporal’s face. “I have already made two rounds of the entire infirmary, Corporal, and I will continue to do so until I am called away. You appear to be much healthier than you were a couple of hours ago when they brought you in.”

“I felt like I was dying then,” the young corporal admitted, “but whatever you did to me, it has worked like a miracle. I feel just fine now. I can return to my duties if you will dismiss me.”

A loud commotion caught the queen’s attention, and she turned towards the main door of the infirmary. Two guards burst into the room, one holding the door open while the other looked around for an empty bed. Immediately following the two guards were two more guards, and they were dragging a sergeant between them. Unlike the other patients in the infirmary, the sergeant had bloodstains on his uniform. The queen watched as the guards dragged the sergeant to an empty bed and chained him to it. With a sense of urgency she returned her gaze to the young corporal.

“I want you to stay here for a while, Corporal. If you are still feeling well on my next round, I will have you dismissed.”

The queen did not wait for a response. She hurried across the floor to speak to the guards before they left.

“What is going on here?” asked the queen.

“It’s Sergeant Skyler, Queen Tanya,” answered one of the guards. “He’s got a bad case of whatever is going around.”

“You mean the plague?” asked the queen. “That would hardly account for the bloodstains.”

“Aye, he has the plague,” answered one of the guards, “but he has the other affliction as well. He attacked Colonel Borowski with a knife.”

“He just isn’t in his right mind,” added another guard. “I’ve known the sergeant for a long time and he worships the colonel. I can’t make any sense out of it.”

“I saw it with my own eyes,” declared a third guard. “It was a clumsy attack, and he didn’t count on the colonel being as good as he is. He’s pretty fast for a colonel.”

“The king and I have great respect for Colonel Borowski,” stated the queen. “If we didn’t think he could handle himself well, he wouldn’t be in charge of the army. What were your orders regarding Sergeant Skyler?”

“We were to bring him here for the healers to mend before taking him to the dungeon. Two of us are to stay with him at all times.”

The queen nodded silently as she moved around the bed to examine the patient. The bloodstains were coming from a single deep gash on the sergeant’s forearm. Tanya suspected that it was the sergeant’s knife hand and that the colonel had slashed out to force the attacker to drop his knife. Apparently it had worked.

“Get his tunic off,” ordered the queen, “and for goodness sakes, remove his boots. We have other patients needing these beds, and we can’t be changing the linens after each one. Try not to splatter his blood around, either. I will be right back.”

The queen quickly completed her round and returned to the new patient. Two of the guards had disappeared, and the other two were talking to a neighboring patient. The queen first healed the knife wound and then turned her attention to the plague. Without knowing the precise nature of the plague, all she could do was to call forth a generic healing spell. That spell appeared to be working wonders with the other patients, but the queen was not entirely sure why, and that bothered her. She wished that Zalaharic would hurry his return to Tagaret.

A soft voice interrupted the queen’s thoughts. “You asked to be notified when your mother woke. She just ordered a morning meal sent to her quarters.”

Tanya turned and nodded to the young woman and then returned to her patient. By the time she finished treating the sergeant, she was weary. She had been in the infirmary all day, and she knew it must be close to dusk, if not even later. She sighed wearily and left the infirmary. She met Jenneva on the way to the king’s chambers.

“You look as tired as I felt earlier today,” Jenneva said sympathetically. You should get some rest.”

“I will,” promised the queen. “Mother, what spells are you using on the sick?”

“Just a generic healing spell,” answered Jenneva. “Why do you ask?”

“I do not like treating something that I do not understand. Do your patients recover quickly?”

“I truly do not know,” answered Jenneva. “There are so many

people infected that I just treat them and move on to the next. I can see an improvement between when I start and when I leave, so I know the spell is doing some good, but there hasn't been time to go back and see if their health remains strong. Have you had different experiences?"

"I have been working strictly in the infirmary," replied the queen, "so I get to watch the patients over a period of time. I get the same feeling as you do that the healing spell brings an acceptable level of health back to the patients, but I sense more than that is happening."

"What do you mean?"

"The patients continue to improve far beyond what I would expect," stated Tanya. "It is as if I am offering some miraculous cure, but I am only using a generic healing spell. It makes no sense."

"Perhaps that spell just happens to be appropriate for this particular plague," suggested Jenneva.

"No." Tanya shook her head. "I have released men that were perfectly fit to return to duty, only to have them show up again at the infirmary several hours later. Besides, if the spell was accomplishing all of the healing, the greatest benefit should occur during the treatment, but I see patients improving greatly from one round to the next with no treatment in between."

"That does not sound right," frowned Jenneva. "You make me want to visit the patients that I saw last night to see what condition they are in now, but I do not have the luxury of a lot of time. There are so many sick that I cannot ignore the ill to check up on those who have already been healed. We need more healers."

"I sent out fairies this morning to summon more mages to Tagaret," stated the queen, "but they are not all healers. I also sent out fairies to find Zalaharic and Balamor."

"Zalaharic has not reported back yet?" Jenneva asked with concern. "Isn't Podil with him?"

"They are supposed to be together somewhere in Sordoa, but Thrip has not returned with a report."

"What about Twerp?" asked Jenneva. "Isn't he still assigned to Wylan? He should be there with Zalaharic."

The queen sighed and shook her head. "Oh, goodness. The fairy that reported the loss of Wylan and Sheri was on duty watching one of the Doors. Twerp took her place, but no one thought to send a fairy to relieve Twerp. He is probably still monitoring the inn in Caldar. I must have Prince Midge send someone out to relieve him."

The two women stopped outside the door to the king's chambers. Jenneva looked at her daughter with concern.

"You are taking too much of the burden of this war on yourself, Tanya. You can't be everything to everyone. Leave the fairies to Prince

Midge and the spying to Prince Oscar. There can't be many Snakes left in Alcea at this point."

"We have found hundreds of them," replied Queen Tanya, "but I am sure that others still exist. They are out there waiting for the right time to strike. I cannot allow them that opportunity. Besides, Prince Oscar is already spending a great deal of time with General Gregor working out the logistics of our defense, and he also works constantly with Prince Midge on the fairy network. All of them have worked tremendously over the past few months. We are just spread too thin, Mother."

"Alex and I will help ease that burden," promised Jenneva.

The queen glanced at the two guards standing outside the door, and decided to cease talking in front of them. She stepped forward and opened the door. Both women walked through the door and Tanya closed it.

"You and Father could be a great help," Tanya said softly, "but I worry about this latest episode in the library. As much as I want you both here in the Royal Palace, it might be wise for the two of you to be elsewhere until the war is over. We will get through this current crisis, but we cannot afford to have another."

"Let's get through this one first," suggested Jenneva. "Then we can talk about the future."

The queen nodded and led Jenneva to the king's sleeping chamber. She opened the door and entered quietly. Prince Midge looked up with excitement on his face.

"This has been a most boring task," chirped Prince Midge. "Next time I will want to assign it to someone else. Can I awaken him now?"

Tanya nodded as Jenneva entered the room and shut the door. Prince Midge dropped the sleep spell, but the king did not immediately waken. Tanya reached out and took the king's hand. Gently she pulled on it, and the king's eyes opened. He smiled dreamily at the queen, and then his eyes saw Jenneva. He sat up in bed with a start as his mind started to fill with memories of the library.

"Where is Alex?" the king asked in alarm. "Is he all right?"

"You tell us," Jenneva replied with a stern expression. "He is currently in the dungeon for attacking the king. Do you plan to have him executed?"

The king's brow knitted with concern even as his face reddened with embarrassment. "He is in the dungeon?" The king turned to Tanya. "Why didn't you free him?"

"By law, I cannot," answered the queen. "Back in the days of the Contest of Power, the laws were changed to protect the king. Only you can have Alex released from the dungeon. Will you do so?"

King Arik returned his gaze to Jenneva. “I will do so immediately. Might I have some privacy to get dressed?”

Jenneva nodded and left the room. To assure her mother that nothing secret was going on in her absence, the queen also left the room. A few minutes later, King Arik entered the room and immediately called for a guard. He scribbled out a release for Alex and handed it to the guard. The Red Sword saluted and left the room. Arik opened his mouth to speak, but Jenneva shook her head.

“Let us wait until Alex is with us,” suggested Jenneva. “I think we all need to discuss what happened this morning. Shall I order some food for you while we wait?”

The king nodded and Jenneva went out the door and spoke to the remaining guard. She then returned to the king’s chambers and sat down. An awkward silence filled the room. Eventually, the door opened and Alexander Tork entered the room. He closed the door and sat next to Jenneva.

“How are you feeling, Arik?” asked Alex.

“I am confused,” admitted the king. “I have a vague recollection of the events in the library this morning, but I do not understand them. Why did you attack me?”

“You were killing Alan Markel,” answered Alex. “I do not think you intended to do so, but that is what you were doing. I could not let you do that. Not only would I never forgive myself, you would never forgive yourself, either.”

“I just tried to stop him from walking out on me,” frowned the king.

“You were not yourself this morning,” Alex retorted. “And I think you often forget your strength. In any event, I acted because I had to. I would do so again. If I am to pay a price for my actions, I will accept your punishment, but I am worried about you, Arik. I have known you for a long time now, and I think I can say that I have known you as few others have, but what I saw this morning scared me. You were neither Arik Clava nor Arik Dalek, and I think both of your fathers would agree with me. What is going on?”

“I don’t know, Alex,” sighed the king. “If my memories of this morning are correct, I was indeed a very ugly king. I cannot imagine what my advisors must think of me now.”

“I am not concerned with the feelings of your advisors,” stated Alex. “I am only concerned with you. Has Zalaharic returned yet?”

Jenneva looked queerly at her husband. “He has not returned yet, but a fairy has been sent for him as well as Balamor. Why are you asking about Zalaharic?”

“Because the king was not the king this morning,” answered Alex. “Look, we all know Arik very well, and I do not think any here would

question the fact that the king was not the Arik we know and love. That leads me to believe that the enemy has found a way to influence Arik without his knowledge. Zalaharic has an interesting ability to sense such things."

"The irritability that is sweeping the city?" asked Jenneva.

"Yes," replied Alex.

"But Theos has been maintaining a shield over Arik all day, every day," stated the queen. "If the enemy even has a spell that can induce such irritability, its delivery would be impossible unless they can cast through our shields." Alex nodded affirmatively and the queen frowned deeply. "You do realize that you are suggesting that the enemy has a way of getting through our shields? If that is the case, we are all in great danger."

"Theos is not shielding him now," Jenneva pointed out.

"Not while he is in his chambers," frowned the queen. "There should be no need for that."

"There is one Claw of Alutar left unaccounted for," interjected the king, "and the Mage indicated that each would be more dangerous than the one before it. Do you think those demonkin might have such powers?"

"We can't answer that," Jenneva replied. "K'san certainly had powers that we were unprepared for, and I think the Claws of Alutar are far more powerful than the priests. Certainly Fakir Aziz thought so, and I would never disregard his thoughts."

"The irritability that has swept this city is certainly not something that we expect to see from the citizens of Tagaret," mused the queen. "I am willing to entertain the thought that someone could be using spells to accomplish this, but to what end?"

"Chaos," answered Alex. "It is bad enough that this plague has forced us to confront General Bledsoe with only four-thousand men instead of ten-thousand, but to have the entire city in turmoil cripples us. Without proper armies to go against Bledsoe and then Fortella, we will have forty-thousand enemy soldiers sieging Tagaret. When that happens, we will need every able-bodied citizen helping us to defend the city."

"It is a clever plan," conceded the king. "Do you suppose the irritability and the plague are coming from the same source?"

Tanya's eyebrow rose. "That is a possibility that I had not considered, but it might be worth pursuing. I just came from the infirmary. There are puzzles there that concern me. Jenneva and I have already started discussing the magic portion of that puzzle, but there was a sergeant sent to the infirmary just before I left. He had just come down with the plague, but he also just attacked his superior officer. I now wonder if it might make sense to see how many of the

plague patients have also been uncharacteristically irritable. There might be a connection."

"Two different symptoms from the same spell?" retorted Jenneva. "That is highly unlikely."

"It might be unlikely," countered the king, "but I think it is worth investigating. Tanya, why don't you convene a meeting of the advisors and divvy up this new work among them? I do not think I can face them right now."

"I think you need to, Arik," stated Alex. "I know it may be embarrassing, but you need them to know that it was not you speaking this morning. We cannot afford to have dissention in our ranks."

"He's right, Arik," agreed Tanya. "Tell them that you were affected by a spell and that we are looking into it. You need the council firmly behind you at this time."

"Very well," sighed King Arik. "I probably also need to address the citizens, too. It is long past time for them to be informed of what is facing us."

"No," Alex said curtly. "I do not think that is wise just yet."

"Why not?" frowned the king.

"I am not sure," admitted Alex, "but my gut screams every time you mention addressing the people. I tried to tell myself that I was merely concerned that you might act as you did this morning in the library, but I can now see that you have returned to your former self. Yet my gut still screams at the thought of you exposing yourself to danger. I cannot explain it any better than that."

Arik, Tanya, and Jenneva glanced at one another, but it was the king who spoke. "Your battle instincts are enough to sway my mind, Alex, but we need to inform the people that the Crown is not ignoring their plight. Find a way for me to address them that pleases your gut, and I will hold off on public appearances for now."

Alex nodded. "Jenneva said that Balamor has been summoned to the palace. As he is a master of illusions, I think he may be the answer. He certainly has an amazing ability for presenting something that is not there, no matter how complex the image might be."

"That is a good idea," agreed Jenneva. "He can spend some time with Arik as the king addresses the people in private. Balamor can then recreate that image at any place in the city, and no one will suspect that the king is not there in person."

"Agreed," stated the king. "Let's get the advisors together so we don't waste any more time than necessary."

"Tedi's father might not answer the call," warned Alex. "He had tried to resign this morning. That is when you attacked him."

"Then let me put on a pair of slippers," the king responded. "I will

personally go to Alan right now and beg his forgiveness. He deserves as much."

* * * *

General Somma's command tent was slightly smaller than General Franz's tent, but it was still large. Colonel Rotti searched it again, afraid that his superior officer's body was curled up in one of the corners. The colonel was not anxious to broadcast his concern for the general, but he had run out of options. He stepped outside the tent and addressed the guards stationed there.

"Did you see General Somma leave this tent?" Colonel Rotti asked.

"No, Colonel," answered one of the guards. "No one has entered or left the tent except you in the last two hours."

Colonel Rotti nodded and walked away. He knew that the guards had been changed two hours ago, so further questioning would get him no additional information. He was tempted to wander around the camp again, but the encampment was huge. The general could be almost anywhere, and the colonel would not find him. Rotti was worried. After two days of riding alongside that huge lake, General Somma had appeared ashen, and Rotti was sure that the general was not sleeping well. Although he agreed with most that Somma was not fit to be a general, Rotti liked the man. He was just in over his head. He knew there was a story behind Somma's ascension, but the colonel did not have the nerve to ask the general about it. Colonel Rotti sighed anxiously and kicked the dirt in frustration. A murmured complaint reached his ears, and the colonel looked and saw that he had kicked dirt at a sleeping soldier. He apologized and decided to move towards the camp's perimeter.

As he approached the northern perimeter of the camp, one of the colonel's men called to him. The moon was bright and the colonel recognized the man. He walked towards him.

"Anything going on out there?" asked the colonel.

"Not a thing stirring," Colonel," answered the perimeter guard, "but I am a bit concerned about the general."

Colonel Rotti's eyes widened. "Why are you concerned about the general?"

"He left the camp," answered the guard, "and he has been gone for hours. I offered to provide him with a protective detail, but he refused. He should have been back a long time ago."

"Which direction did he go?" asked the colonel.

"Towards the river," answered the guard.

"Towards the river?" the colonel echoed with alarm. "Are you sure?"

The guard merely nodded.

“I am going out to look for him,” stated the colonel, “and no, I do not want a detail, either. In fact, do not tell anyone else that either of us is outside the perimeter.”

The guard nodded silently and moved the barricade aside so that the colonel could pass through it. Colonel Rotti walked slowly, not wanting to miss any sign of the general’s path. Thankfully the moon was bright, and visibility was excellent. After just a few minutes of walking, he saw the general sitting on the riverbank. The colonel’s face clouded with confusion as the riverbank was absolutely the last place that Rotti would have looked for the general. He walked silently towards the river and quietly sat down next to General Somma. The general hardly noticed him.

“You had me worried, General,” Colonel Rotti said softly. “What are you doing down here?”

General Somma’s hands were shaking with fear. He tried to hide them by gripping his legs, but that action only made his legs quiver as well.

“I don’t know what I am doing here,” quaked the general. “To tell you the truth, I do not belong here, especially in this uniform. I am not a general, Rotti. Everyone knows that, even you, but you at least have not mocked me, at least not to my face.”

“Nor behind your back,” declared the colonel, “but that is not what I meant when I asked why you were here. I meant, what are you doing on the riverbank? I know that you fear the water. Why torture yourself like this?”

“I have suffered a great deal of humiliation because of my fear of water,” the general explained, “but no one has ever treated me as cruelly as Franz. That man takes great delight in seeing me quiver. Several times a day he orders me to the riverbank just to watch me cower. I want to kill him.”

Rotti’s eyes widened in surprise. General Somma had just uttered a treasonous speech, but what surprised the colonel was the raw hatred expressed. He had never heard Somma speak ill of anyone.

“That would not be a good career move,” the colonel quipped, hoping to bring a bit of levity into the conversation to lift the general’s spirits.

“Career?” scoffed the general. “Do you really think there is any higher position suited for me? I should not even be a general, and I wouldn’t be if Queen Samir had not demanded it.”

“Why did she demand it?” asked the colonel.

“Two reasons,” frowned Somma. “The position brought prestige to my family, and the queen was able to extract a healthy fee from my father for promoting me, but the true reason was to punish another officer. He was a talented officer, and he demanded to be promoted.

He was also the queen's lover. She felt he had exceeded his bounds and was taking too much for granted. She squashed his large ego by promoting the most unlikely candidate instead of him. Now you know the quality of the man you serve under. Are you disappointed?"

"No," answered the colonel. "I have never thought of you as a great general, but I have recognized a good man within you. You are just ill-suited to this life. That does not make you worthless in my eyes. It merely means that you need to follow the path that appeals to your talents instead of one chosen by the queen."

"You are a good man, Rotti," replied the general. "I have known that from the start. That is why you are my favored colonel. It is you who should be wearing this uniform, not me."

"You still haven't answered my first question," the colonel said. "Why are you sitting on this riverbank? Shouldn't we go back to camp and talk inside the tent?"

"No." The general shook his head vigorously. "I am here to conquer my fears. I cannot take any more of Franz's bullying. If I cannot walk away from this river without fear then I deserve to die here." The colonel did not know how to respond, and the general continued talking. "For the past two days, I survived by hoping that the Alceans might kill Franz for me, but look at this dam. Have you ever seen a more pitiful excuse for a dam? If this is the best the Alceans can do, there is not a chance in this world of Franz dying."

Colonel Rotti glanced at the massive dam. There was truth to Somma's words. The dam was crude in every sense of the word. It had not been so obvious when they were looking at it from the lake side of the dam, but on this side, the evidence was hard to miss. The dam was constructed of crudely cut trees, and they were stacked in what looked to be a haphazard manner. Still, the colonel reasoned, it did a fairly decent job of keeping the water contained behind it, and that is all it was supposed to do. The bright moonlight illuminated what appeared to be a chain coming from the bottom of the dam. The colonel stared at it and wondered what it was for, but a nearby splash tore him from his musings. He whirled around and saw General Somma standing in the water. He leaped into the water and took hold of the general.

"You do not need to do this, General," the colonel said soothingly. "You need not prove anything to Franz or anyone else. Your fear is not of your own making. Do not torture yourself over it. You let me handle General Franz."

Chapter 23

Day Eight

Twerp shot down through the trees, his tiny eyes glanced around the dim clearing. He saw Wylan sitting up with his back against a tree, and he shrieked with delight. He darted towards the Knight of Alcea and landed on Wylan's raised knee.

"You are alive!" the fairy chirped rapidly as he jumped up and down on Wylan's knee. "I thought I had lost you. I made it to the Rider's Rest and sent the fairy there on to Tagaret for help, but they forgot about me. I was stranded in the inn until just now. Forgive me for not being here."

"Slow down, little man," Wylan replied, the barest of smiles upon his lips. "There is nothing to forgive you for. Your tireless efforts brought the best healers a man could wish for. I owe my life to your efforts."

"Yet you do not seem very happy," frowned Twerp as he gazed around the clearing in the predawn dimness.

Twerp saw Wesik lying on his side, the sleeping bodies of Zalaharic and Podil near the unicorn. Zalaharic was stirring, as if the fairy's excitement had awoken him. Nearby, Sinora lay on the ground, two other unicorns standing above her. At the other side of the clearing, Sheri's body lay in isolation. The fairy noticed Wylan gazing at his former mate.

"I guess I should be thrilled to be alive," Wylan said softly, "but I feel nothing but sadness in my heart. I am happy that Sinora and Wesik have survived, but I cannot imagine life without Sheri. I would gladly trade places with her. She has always been the one with joy in her heart."

Tears came unbidden to Twerp's eyes, and he abruptly turned away from Wylan so that the Knight of Alcea would not see his weakness. He need not have bothered. Wylan's own tears began streaming down his face as if merely talking about Sheri brought fresh pain to his heart.

"Tears are good for washing the eyes," Zalaharic said softly as he gently shook Podil and then rose to his feet, "but they can also blur your vision."

Wylan blinked at the words. The Knight of Alcea was not sure if the elven healer was stating another of his wise platitudes, or if he was issuing a warning to Wylan about his extremely sensitive eyes.

Zalaharic had cured Wylan's blindness after the Battle of Watling Flats, but the cure had left the Knight of Alcea with very sensitive eyes. Wylan usually wore eye patches with tiny holes cut in them to minimize the amount of light that reached his eyes.

"You are wanted in Tagaret," Twerp said to Zalaharic. "There is a plague running rampant through the city. You are to return there immediately."

Zalaharic frowned as Podil rose and moved to his side.

"What are we to do with our patients?" asked Zalaharic. "We cannot just leave them here in the forest. That is unacceptable."

"Wesik is strong enough to walk now," answered Podil, "and Wylan can ride Sinora. They can make it to Caldar."

"And Sheri?" balked Zalaharic. "I will not abandon her."

Wylan's heart skipped a beat and he stared at Zalaharic with eyes as large as coins. Podil frowned in confusion. She looked at Sheri's body and then returned her gaze to Zalaharic.

"What are you saying?" Wylan asked. "Is Sheri not dead?"

"She is not dead," declared Zalaharic, "nor is she alive. She exists in some state in between, and I am not sure what to do for her."

"If she is not dead," scowled Wylan, "why have you not been tending to her? I would rather you save her than me."

"The rest of you required immediate attention," explained Zalaharic. "Sheri did not. I have kept an eye on her these past few days. Her condition has not changed. If there is a cure for her condition, it could wait a couple of days until the rest of you were saved from death. That wait is now over, and she must be tended to immediately. I cannot just hope that she remains stable until I come back from Tagaret. I cannot return to the city just now."

"The Bringer has ordered it," frowned Twerp. "It was not a request."

Everyone fell silent for a moment while Zalaharic glanced around the clearing.

"Podil," Zalaharic said softly, "you shall return to Tagaret. Your skill at battling a plague is as valuable as mine. I must try to save Sheri."

Podil frowned deeply. She knew that Zalaharic would have to enter Sheri's body to discover the source of her condition, and she knew that such a session would be extremely dangerous, especially when battling the unknown.

"I cannot let you do that, Zalaharic," she replied defiantly. "It is too dangerous for you to enter her unmonitored. I have to be by your side in case you become trapped. Remember, it was dark magic that ensnared her. Do not take this danger lightly."

"There is a risk," conceded Zalaharic, "but there are also

thousands in Tagaret needing help. They cannot be ignored, either. Splitting our efforts is the wisest approach."

"But you are bound to the Bringer's service," frowned Twerp. "You cannot ignore his call. He will punish you."

Wylan's hand shot out and grabbed the fairy off of his knee. He brought Twerp close to his mouth and spoke in a low, threatening voice.

"I will not have my Sheri abandoned, not for a million people."

Wylan released the fairy, and Twerp fluttered back to his perch on Wylan's knee. He knew that Wylan would never harm him, but the Knight of Alcea had made clear his devotion to his mate. The fairy nodded with understanding.

"I will take the blame," the fairy offered to Zalaharic. "I will tell the Bringer that I ignored his orders to send you back to Tagaret. He will find you faultless."

Zalaharic smiled warmly at the fairy. "Lies do not become you, Twerp, but your sentiments are warmly appreciated. I will take whatever punishment Valon seeks for this transgression, but I think if King Arik understood the decision facing me, he would agree with my judgment. A Knight of Alcea is worth extraordinary efforts to save, and I intend to do my best to save Sheri. Take word back to Valon of my decision. Podil will leave immediately for Tagaret."

"Not immediately," Podil stated as her eyes gazed into Wylan's eyes. "If I am not to stay and monitor you, Zalaharic, I will train Wylan to take my place. It is far too dangerous for you to work unaided, and Wylan is just the person to keep you alive, for without you, there is no hope for Sheri."

Wylan's eyes grew large as he listened to Podil's words. A shiver of fear raced through his body as he realized the responsibility being thrust onto him, but he nodded enthusiastically.

"Tell me what to do."

Zalaharic smiled and nodded. "It appears that we have a solution that works. My only alteration concerns Twerp. Wake Thrip and send her back to Tagaret. Twerp will help Wylan monitor me. Between the two of them, I think I will be fine."

Podil had great doubts about the situation, but she nodded in agreement with the solution. The thought of a fairy monitoring Zalaharic intrigued Podil, and she filed it in the back of her mind as she prepared to leave for Tagaret.

* * * *

Rut-ki stood on the eastern bank of the Chi River and glanced up at the predawn sky. The stars were bright, and the Knight of Alcea nodded with satisfaction. She had hoped for the skies to be clear on the day of the attack, and it seemed that her wish had been granted.

Rut-ki turned away from the river and strode into the Lanoirian army camp. The camp was already stirring as five-thousand Lanoirian soldiers woke and consumed their morning meal. Rut-ki moved through the camp until she came to the command tent. She entered the tent and nodded to the leader of the Lanoirian force.

"Good morning," greeted Colonel Wu-sang. "Would you care for a cup of tea?"

Rut-ki nodded and joined the colonel at a small table set up in the center of the tent. She took a sip of the tea and then looked the colonel in the eyes.

"The day has arrived," stated the Knight of Alcea. "Everything must go exactly according to plan. There are too many of the enemy for us to allow for mistakes."

"I understand," nodded the colonel. "I have had my men make practice runs every morning. Nothing will go wrong."

Rut-ki sighed lightly at the colonel's words. While she had great respect for the colonel and his men, nothing ever went perfectly. She decided to go through the preparations one more time.

"Are the wagons ready?" she asked.

"Five-hundred wagons and their teams and drivers are ready and waiting," answered the colonel. "Each driver has a map to his designated destination, and another copy of the map is stored under the seat of each wagon. No one will get lost, and the drivers are required to return both copies of the maps so that they will not fall into the enemy's hands without us being alerted to it."

"Good," nodded Rut-ki. "Have your men also been instructed to note the regiment, company, and squad of each man entering the wagons?"

"And they have been told that no more than two men from any single Federation squad are to be put in the same wagon," replied the colonel. "I have used my own men to practice these procedures. The orders will be followed as you have specified."

"What about the lifelines?" asked Rut-ki.

"The chains will be rowed across the river as soon as you authorize it," answered the colonel. "As Cho-sung specified, each chain across the river will be slightly lower than the one before it. He did warn us that the last couple of chains might be so low that they snag debris coming downstream. We have had no way to test that, but it is a concern. If the debris snags on the last few chains, it could create a new dam, and that will endanger my men as well as the Federation."

Rut-ki frowned and nodded. "If that happens, release both ends of the affected chains."

"That will doom those men to death," warned the colonel. "They

will not survive the journey to the sea."

"I understand," replied Rut-ki, "but that is the best that we can do. We are attempting to save as many of the Federation soldiers as we can, but I will not endanger all of your men to do so. Remember that the primary goal here is to incapacitate the 4th Corps and 18th Corps. If we can save thousands of their men while doing so, that is wonderful, but the primary goal must be met at all costs, even if that means killing all of the Federation soldiers. What about the fairies?"

"They are cute little creatures," smiled the colonel. "They are not only ready to perform their part, but they are eager to do so."

"Will one-hundred of them be enough?" asked Rut-ki. "I might be able to come up with a few more if needed, although they are becoming more scarce as we find new tasks suited to them."

"They will be enough," answered Colonel Wu-sang. "There will be no confusion as to the choices open to the Federation soldiers."

"And the black-cloaks?" asked Rut-ki. "Have you stressed the importance of killing them quickly?"

"Very much so," frowned the colonel. "We have no defenses against their magic. They are the primary targets for every archer along the banks of the river. I have stressed over and over again that if a single one of them survives, we might all die. While I cannot guarantee their deaths, I feel very confident that none of them will survive."

"I will also be looking for them," promised Rut-ki, "and I will have an excellent view of the river. Very well then, Colonel, when your men are done with the morning meal, I suggest you get a fifth of them across the river. The attack will begin at high sun."

* * * *

The four heroes of the Mage gathered in the king's study to discuss their plans for the day over the morning meal. They had just finished eating when there was a knock on the door. The door opened and a Red Sword stuck his head in and announced that Balamor was waiting outside the room. The king gave permission for the gaunt, red-headed mage from Pog to enter.

"Balamor," smiled Jenneva, "come join us. Would you care for something to eat?"

"I am not hungry," replied Balamor as he approached the table and sat down. "I understand that a plague infests the city. How can I help?"

"We need all the healing mages we can get," answered Queen Tanya, "but I think we also need your skills in another area. King Arik needs to address the citizens of Tagaret, but Alex feels that there is danger waiting for Arik in the city."

"A Claw of Alutar to be specific," interjected Alex. "We know that

one of those demonkin remain, but we can not be positive that he is already in the city. My gut just screams every time someone mentions the king addressing the people."

"I have heard about the Claws of Alutar," frowned Balamor. "They are not to be taken lightly. I suppose you wish me to create an illusion?"

"We think it would be the safest way for me to speak to the people," replied King Arik. "I feel foolish for even asking this of you, but I learned long ago not to question Alex's feelings when he has them."

"Never feel foolish for expecting treachery from your enemies," Balamor smiled sympathetically. "If there is a Claw of Alutar in this city, I can make him believe that you are standing before him. It is a simple task."

"Perhaps not so simple," retorted Jenneva. "The king is not known for traveling the city streets alone. In fact, the Red Swords have become so protective lately that they usually insist on a large number of soldiers accompanying the king. The illusion would not be believable otherwise. We thought about using large numbers of fairies to accomplish the task, but we have discarded such plans. Most of the fairies are already tasked elsewhere, and we think the illusion should be moving rather than stationary."

Balamor nodded in understanding. The type of illusion required to manipulate so many moving objects would be extremely complex. The fairies would be incapable of doing it.

"Why must the illusion be moving?" asked Balamor.

"We do not know where in the city the demonkin might be," answered Alex, "and if we announce beforehand where the king will speak, we give the enemy too much time to plan the assassination and escape routes. We want the demonkin to have to act in haste."

Balamor frowned and pressed his lips tightly together. For several moments, he did not speak. Everyone waited patiently.

"If I were the assassin," Balamor eventually said, "I would simply wait for the location of the speech to be announced. Why take the risk of acting in haste?"

"The location of the speech will become crowded within minutes after it is announced," answered Alex. "Even if the demonkin races to the location, he will stand no better chance of getting close than any other citizen."

"And he will stand almost no chance of getting away unnoticed," added Queen Tanya. "The citizens will shout and point him out. They will even attack him, not understanding his powers."

"And this demonkin has orders to kill all four of us," interjected Jenneva. "He cannot afford to be discovered while only killing one of

us. Unless we are all killed together, he has to remain undiscovered to complete his task."

"I can see that you have devoted some thinking to this problem," stated Balamor. "Can I have a day to view the city and the routes you anticipate using?"

King Arik frowned at the delay, but he nodded in agreement. "You shall have everything you require," he promised. "I will notify my staff to cooperate fully with you."

"Excellent," Balamor responded as he rose to leave. "I will let you know when I am ready to hear your speech."

* * * *

Colonel Rotti glanced at the meager flow of the Chi River as he rode alongside the column heading towards the vanguard. It was much less of a river than what he remembered from his journey last fall, but it was still beautiful. The thought of the crude dam blocking the flow of the river bothered him. He stared at the farmland across the river and shook his head in wonder. The Lanoirians had flooded excellent farmland upstream to create the lake, and the farmland below the dam seemed starved for water. It made no sense to him why they would do such a thing.

"Are you planning to lead this army, Rotti?" scowled General Franz.

The colonel tore his eyes away from the river and turned towards the column. In his admiration of the river, he had not been paying attention. He had passed the leader of Team Chi and was almost riding point. He slowed his horse and fell in alongside General Franz.

"What are you doing up here, Rotti?" asked the general.

"I was told that you wished to speak to me," replied the colonel.

"I asked for General Somma to come forward," scowled the general.

"I am acting on behalf of General Somma," retorted Colonel Rotti. "The general is feeling a bit under the weather today. What did you need to discuss?"

Colonel Rotti knew that General Franz had summoned General Somma to further humiliate him, but the colonel was not going to let that happen if he could prevent it.

"Have you officially relieved Somma of command of the 18th Corps?" snarled General Franz.

"I have not," admitted the colonel. "As I am sure that you are aware, until we leave the war zone, only you have the authority to elevate me to command the 18th Corps, and you have not done so."

"Then my orders are being disobeyed," snapped General Franz. "I specifically asked for General Somma to come forward."

"My apologies," Colonel Rotti smiled thinly. "I will return to the

rear and explain my impudence to General Somma. I will notify him that you require him in the vanguard for a purpose that I cannot fulfill."

General Franz glared at the colonel. He knew right then that Rotti fully understood the true purpose for calling Somma forward.

"Do not toy with me, Colonel," snapped the general. "I can break men like you quicker than a Spino mare."

"I would never toy with another officer," replied the colonel, "especially in enemy territory when the column might be attacked at any moment. That would be nothing short of foolhardiness."

The general's face reddened with rage, and his hand went for his sword. The colonel's horse faltered for some reason, and the colonel quickly resumed his place alongside the general, but a pace further away, just out of reach of the general's sword.

"Get out of my sight, Colonel," scowled the general, "before I do something we might both regret."

Colonel Rotti saluted the general and turned his horse towards the rear of the column. A moment later, Colonel Kerk appeared at his side.

"That was a very foolish thing to do, Rotti," warned the Baroukan colonel. "General Franz is not the man to make an enemy of. He never forgets a slight, and you have given him every reason to target you instead of General Somma."

"Then my mission was a success," retorted the Spinoan colonel. "What Franz is doing to General Somma is despicable. It is behavior unworthy of an officer in any army."

"I will not argue that," Colonel Kerk said softly, "but it is a death wish to cross Franz like you have. He will see that you die before this war is over."

"And you would help him achieve such a goal?" scowled Colonel Rotti.

"No," Colonel Kerk shook his head, "General Franz knows that we are friends. He will not mention any such plans to me, but there are plenty of others that he can call on to do such a deed. Watch your back, my friend. Unless General Franz dies in battle, your days are numbered."

"Thank you for the warning, Kerk," replied Colonel Rotti. "Let me repay your friendship in kind. If we do come into battle and I am anywhere near General Franz, find an excuse to go elsewhere. You will not want to be by his side at that time, nor would you want to be seen in my company."

Colonel Kerk gasped, and he stared at his friend with disbelief. To kill your own general was the most unthinkable crime imaginable. The other soldiers would literally tear the assassin apart, and take pleasure

in doing it. To even express such a thought was considered treason, yet Colonel Rotti had just done so.

"We shall talk no more," Colonel Kerk said coldly. "I do not want to know what is on your mind. Say nothing to me."

Colonel Rotti nodded sadly and watched his friend turn his horse and head in the opposite direction. For a long time, the colonel simply sat on his horse, staring at the river while the column marched by him. He had not intended to get into a death match with General Franz, but he abhorred the Baroukan general, and he would not let that man continue to terrorize General Somma. As his eyes stared at the water flowing by, his thoughts turned to desertion. If he could somehow get General Somma away General Franz, things might have a decent ending. There would certainly be a price to pay down the road, but if they survived the war, they could then plead their case in front of the king. The idea did not please the colonel. He was not the type of soldier to desert his post, but he knew that he could not survive the daggers of General Franz for long. In fact, he would not be surprised if an assassin came at him in the camp this very evening.

Colonel Rotti dragged his mind away from his morbid thoughts and started riding towards the rear of the column again. He tried to replace the darkness in his mind by reminding himself how beautiful the countryside was. He let his eyes follow the river upstream to the distant dam. Movement off to the side attracted his attention, and he focused on the far bank of the river. He watched as eight large oxen were led to the edge of the high cliffs of the western bank. He thought it a strange place to lead such a team, and he watched in fascination as several men pulled on something and attached it to the team of oxen. He was too far downstream to have a good view, but the sunlight soon glinted off of something in the water. Something rising out of the water, he corrected himself. As he tried to focus on the bright object, he suddenly understood what he was seeing.

The colonel remembered seeing a chain attached to the bottom of the crude dam, and he knew what the Lanoirians were going to do. He kicked his horse into a gallop and raced towards the rear of the column. As he sped along the eastern bank, his eyes looked across the river at the team of oxen, trying to gauge how much time he had left. The chain was not yet taut, but he knew that there would be no chance of outrunning death. That was not his goal. The colonel spied General Somma in the column, and he shouted for him to leave the column. The general looked confused by the request, but he complied. He turned his horse out of the column, and the colonel brought his horse to a halt nearby. Colonel Rotti leaped off his horse and ran towards the general.

"Dismount," ordered the colonel as he stripped off his sword and

threw it on the ground. “Do it quickly.”

General Somma dismounted. “What is wrong with you, Colonel?”

“You must trust me, Somma,” the colonel replied, ignoring his superior’s rank. “I am trying to save your life. Get rid of anything that is heavy. Remove your boots, your sword, anything that weighs anything.”

The request was absurd, but the general watched as the colonel followed his own advice. Trusting in the colonel, Somma began to comply. The other soldiers passing by looked at the two senior officers and chuckled under their breaths. Colonel Rotti did not even notice them. He was too busy rummaging in his pack for a length of rope.

Chapter 24

The Flood

Colonel Rotti stripped off his pack and tossed it on the ground. He stuck the small grappling hook in his belt next to his knife and then picked up the coil of rope. He took a section of rope and wrapped one end around the general, tying it securely across his chest and under his arms.

"What are you doing, Rotti?" balked the general.

"Saving your life, General," the colonel answered as he passed the other end of the rope under his own arms. "Tie this for me. Make it as tight as you can."

The general hesitated as the passing soldiers started laughing loudly enough to hear.

"General," the colonel said with a sense of urgency, "that crude dam is about to come tumbling down. Tie the rope, or I will not be around to save you."

The general froze and his hands started trembling.

"Tie it, General," snapped the colonel. "I can do it myself, but I will never get it as tight as you can."

General Somma nodded and began tying the rope, but he also started gasping for breath. Colonel Rotti knew that the general was going to be worthless in just a few moments. As soon as the knot was tied, Rotti took the general's hand and dragged him through the column, away from the small stream that would soon become a torrent. He knew that they could not outrun the flood, and that was not what he had in mind. Once through the column, he halted and looked at the closest trees. He immediately dismissed all of the younger trees as being too flimsy and concentrated on the mature ones. He also did not look deep in the woods. He wanted a tree on the very edge of the road, but he particularly wanted a dead tree, or one that had uncovered roots, something that would fall rather easily, but still be sturdy enough to avoid being splintered by another tree. About one-hundred paces away, he saw the perfect tree. It stood out from the rest so that those trees upstream would not crush them while they waited. He pulled the general in a run to the dead tree and placed the general up against it.

"Stand right there and hug the tree," instructed the colonel as he ran around the tree once and then passed the general to stand beside him. He pulled the general away from the tree just enough to let the

rope pass between Somma and the tree. “Listen carefully to me now, General. What I have to say are the most important words you will ever hear. Pay attention to them.”

The general nodded nervously, unable to find his voice.

“When you hear a crack split the air, that will be the sound of the dam breaking. Do not be alarmed. Everyone else is going to panic, but we will not. We are going to stand right here and let the flood carry us downstream. You will have to hold your breath for a very long time, so try to get a hold of your breathing now while you can. Start taking deep breaths and holding them for a bit before letting them out. When the time comes, I will tell you when to take a big breath and hold it. Do you understand?”

“I understand that we are all going to die,” quaked the general.

“No, we aren’t,” the colonel replied with a confidence in his voice that was totally contrived. “You must have faith in me, Somma. Trust me.”

The general nodded, and the colonel felt guilty for his deception. Rotti did not think his ploy had much chance of success, but it was far better than running and screaming like the rest of the soldiers were about to do. He pulled the hook from his belt and forcefully slammed it into the tree between him and the general. He then adjusted the rope so that it set in the curvature of the hook

The crack boomed through the valley like a clap of thunder directly overhead. Somma started sobbing fearfully, and the colonel stretched his hand and gently patted the general’s shoulder. Shouts and screams roared from the road as the soldiers turned and saw the dam crumbing and the water breaking through. For a few moments, the only danger was a huge torrent of water streaming through a hole in the dam. Soldiers started running in every direction, but none of them could outrun what was about to happen. Not even the fastest horse could outrun the deluge that was soon to be upon them.

With another series of loud cracks, the dam ruptured with an explosive force. The huge trees that had made up the dam flew through the air as a solid wall of water burst into the valley. The water roared as it smashed into the ground and swept downstream, tumultuous waves destroying everything they touched. Rotti watched carefully as the flood headed downstream. The center of the riverbed was the first to fill, and the deluge carried some of the huge trees downstream like giant battering rams. Anything in their path would be instantly crushed. The colonel was not concerned with them. He was more concerned with the huge trees that had been thrown to the sides of the stream by the dam explosion. Those trees were not yet in the stream of flowing water, but they would be as soon as the flood widened a little bit more. They were the missiles that would kill the

soldiers still on the road.

He watched as the flood widened at an alarming pace. He knew that the entire valley would be underwater long before the lake was empty, but he was unprepared for the swiftness with which the valley filled. Within mere moments, a solid wall of water stretched across the entire valley. The colonel watched it coming towards him with a sense of dread.

“Give me your hand,” Rotti said to the general, “and grab the tree with your other hand. What ever you do, do not panic. It will be scary, but trust in me. We will survive.”

The colonel glanced over his shoulder and saw the wall of water about to hit. He turned his face away from the flood and shouted for the general to hold his breath. The water hit like a solid brick wall, and the colonel felt himself get lightheaded as he smashed against the tree that he was tied to. Within an eye blink, he had gone from standing next to the road to being entirely underwater. The force of the water tore at him, trying to sweep him downstream, but the rope held him fast, so fast that it felt as if the rope would rip right through his chest and split him in two. He wanted to scream in agony, but he could not. Objects began striking his back with increasing regularity, and Rotti suddenly felt like a fool. The tree he had chosen was sturdier than he had anticipated. Instead of falling easily as he had hoped, it held firm, and showed every intention of continuing to do so. That meant that he and the general were tied at the bottom of the flood with no chance to escape.

Suddenly, Rotti felt the dead tree lean into the flow of the water, but his lungs were already screaming for air. He did not think he would survive even long enough to reach the surface, and he thought about the poor general who had put his faith in him. It was then that he realized that he no longer held Somma’s hand. Rotti’s world started to go dark just as the tree was ripped from the soil. The dead tree shot through the water like an arrow and burst into the air before slamming back into the tumultuous foam. Rotti’s eyes rolled back in his head as he gasped for air. His lungs screamed for more air, and all the colonel could think about was breathing. Waves crested over his body, and water flowed into his mouth. He coughed and gasped as some of the water found its way into his lungs. The colonel lost all sense of time.

When his breathing was somewhat under control, he opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the wild, raging water. What had been a peaceful river the previous fall now had massive confused waves like the sea in the midst of a terrible storm. Everywhere he looked, people and horses were thrashing in the water, and hundreds of trees were floating downstream. The water itself was murky brown,

and huge waves rose unbidden with little sense of direction or purpose. He glanced to his right and saw the general. Somma appeared dead, but Rotti had to be sure. He reached out and grabbed the general's wrist. He felt life still flowing through the general's body, and his lips curled upward in a slight smile. They had both survived the first challenge.

Colonel Rotti pulled himself to the general to make sure that he was breathing. The back of General Somma's uniform was shredded, and his forehead had a nasty cut, but the colonel could detect no other damage. He raised his head up and looked around to get his bearings. The dead tree that they were using for a raft had found its way to the center of the channel. While the whole river was racing towards the sea, the center channel was moving much faster than the edges. The colonel turned to look behind him. The root structure of the dead tree appeared intact, and it gave the colonel an idea. He pulled on the rope in an attempt to reach the roots, but there was not enough play in the rope. He pulled the knife from his sheath and cut the rope. Working frantically in case the dead tree rammed some other debris and threw him into the water, he pulled the rope from Somma's end until he had retrieved the entire coil. He then retied the free end of the coil to the rope tied around his chest.

Colonel Rotti slowly dragged the general's body to the root cluster and leaned him against the roots to keep his head up and away from the surface of the water. He then positioned himself next to the general and began to think of how the wild ride was going to end. The river was now much wider than it had been the previous fall and there were steep banks on both sides. Leaving their raft and swimming to the riverbank was not an option, and not just because of the general's fear of water. Swimming in the river right now was a dangerous gambit. The hundreds of floating bodies nearby attested to that. The current was far too strong, and the flow was littered with trees and other deadly debris. He wondered if he could in some way maneuver the tree as if it were a raft. It was fairly steady in the water, not pitching or rolling as it might have. The colonel turned and stared at the roots, looking for something he would use as an oar or tiller, but the roots were thick and massive. With just a knife, he was not going to be able to cut through any of them. He sighed and returned his gaze forward.

"We are alive," General Somma said with a sense of wonder.

"So far," Colonel Rotti said with a grin. Despite the precarious situation that they were in, he was thrilled to hear the general's voice. "The next trick will be getting back to dry land."

"How did you know that the dam would burst?"

"I saw the oxen pulling it apart," answered the colonel.

“I don’t understand,” frowned the general. “The Alceans destroyed their own dam just to flood us?”

“It is worse than that, General,” sighed Colonel Rotti. “The Alceans built that dam just to destroy us. That is why it was built so crudely. It was never meant to last. I should have suspected the truth when I first saw that chain attached to it.”

For several moments, neither of the soldiers spoke, then the general looked the colonel in the eye with shock on his face.

“That means that the Alceans knew that we were coming this way.”

Colonel Rotti nodded. “And they have known for a long time. Even such a crude dam would take a long time to build. They must have started that dam just after Kerk and I passed through here last fall.”

The dead tree shuddered and screams rang out nearby. The colonel stuck his head up to see what was going on, but he could not see the front end of their raft. Moments later, fresh-killed bodies floated by on both sides in swirls of blood, and Rotti understood the screams. Some soldiers had been unfortunate enough to get in the path of the racing dead tree. The incident caused the colonel to ponder about the stability of the tree. When he had run the rope around it before the dam burst, he had noticed a large branch on the opposite side, and he assumed that the branch was now acting like a keel, giving the raft some sense of stability, but what would happen when men tried to scramble aboard, especially if they all chose to climb up the same side? The colonel decided to prepare for such an event. He gathered the slack coil of rope between the general and himself and pulled his knife again.

“What are you doing?” the general asked fearfully.

“We needed a lot of rope before so that we could wrap it around this big tree,” explained the colonel, “but we don’t need quite so much now. I still want to keep you tied to me just in case one of us gets thrown in the water, but we have far more rope than we need. I am going to cut out a large portion of it and use it to help other survivors get aboard our raft. If I don’t, they might capsize us in their haste to get on.”

The general merely nodded as Rotti cut the rope and retied himself to the general. The colonel then tied one of the ends of the long rope to a thick root in the center of the root structure. He neatly coiled the rest of rope and placed it in front of him where it would be handy to throw to a survivor. Moments later, the tree shuddered again, and another chorus of screams rose from in front of them. Colonel Rotti grimaced thinking of the poor men struck by the giant tree. He stared carefully at the water on his side of the tree, hoping to

spot a survivor that he could throw the rope to, but he saw none. Only bodies floated by.

Unexpectedly, the tree suddenly rolled to the right. Colonel Rotti instinctively reached and grabbed the general before he slid off into the water. The colonel frowned as he saw a pair of hands pulling on the roots on the other side of the general. It was someone trying to climb aboard, and their method would surely spin the tree and dump everyone into the water.

"Wait!" shouted the colonel. "I have a rope I can throw you. Do not try to climb up the side, you will toss us into the water. Get behind us, and I will throw you the rope."

The man paid no attention to the colonel's words. He frantically clawed at the roots, trying to scramble up them. Colonel Rotti took the coil of rope and tossed it high into the air, letting the wind carry it over the root structure so that it was now trailing behind the tree.

"There is a rope trailing behind us," shouted Colonel Rotti. "Grab onto it, and I will pull you aboard."

"Stop playing around, Rotti, and throw me the rope. That is an order."

The colonel's eyes grew wide as he recognized the voice of General Franz. General Somma immediately reached for the knife on Rotti's belt, but the colonel stayed his hand.

"This is my duty, General," Rotti said softly, ignoring the continued angry shouts of General Franz.

"No, Colonel," Somma said with determination as he pushed away the colonel's hand and took the knife from its sheath. "If this is the last thing I do with my life, it is something that I must do. I will not allow him to survive this and live to torment other soldiers under him. He must be removed from command, and I am the person to do it."

The colonel frowned as General Somma moved to cut the rope tying the two of them together. "What are you doing?"

"I will not drag you to your death after all you have done for me," answered Somma. "You are as fine a man as I have ever known, Rotti. Farewell."

Colonel Rotti gasped. He finally understood what the Spinoan general had in mind. Somma was going to throw himself into the water so that he could get close enough to kill Franz. Somma would, of course, die in the process. Rotti reached out and seized the general's wrist before he could sever the rope. General Somma stared at the colonel with confusion. The colonel smiled thinly.

"If you have the guts to throw yourself into the water," stated the colonel, "I have the guts to hang onto one of these roots and haul you back up. Leave us tied together."

The Spinoan general hesitated only a moment before nodding in agreement. Rotti rose, helped the general to his feet, and then wrapped his arms around the biggest root he could reach.

"You are in command," Rotti said softly.

General Somma nodded and walked forward as far as the rope allowed. When he could go no further, he turned to the right and walked until he slipped off the tree and into the water. The tree immediately lurched to the right as the weight of both generals pulled it over. Colonel Rotti hung onto the root, his arms aching from the effort. After a moment, the tree pitched back a bit. He bit his lips anxiously as he waited for some sign of the outcome.

"Pull me up if you can," said the voice of General Somma.

Rotti pulled the general onto the tree, and they both sat down exhausted. Neither of them spoke. A moment later a voice spoke to them.

"Hail soldiers of the Federation. Those of you who have survived the flood will be given a chance to surrender. There are chains stretched across the river up ahead. If you wish to surrender, drop your weapons in the river and use the chains to get to the left bank. You will not be harmed. Should you choose to stay in the river, or try to flee via the right bank, you will be killed."

The two Federation officers looked at each other with questioning expressions. They could not tell where the voice was coming from.

Finally, Somma shouted and pointed up. "There! It is a tiny creature!"

Rotti looked up and saw a tiny, winged woman with blue skin. She started repeating the same message. The colonel also heard echoes of the message coming from every direction. "What are you?" he shouted.

The tiny woman gazed down at him and said, "There is no time to talk now. Make your choice quickly. The first of the chains is coming up."

The tiny woman flew overhead and disappeared. Rotti turned to look for her, but the sight of the roots distracted him. He frowned deeply. If there was a chain across the river, it would either be too high for them to reach or it would be low enough for the tree to get stuck. Either way, they would not be able to simply reach up and grab the chain as they passed under it.

"The Alceans are serious," gasped General Somma. "Look at the right bank. There are archers there ready to kill anyone coming that way. This trap is well planned."

Colonel Rotti glanced at the right bank and saw the archers. He frowned and began pulling in the trailing rope. When he had it all coiled up, he cut the rope binding him to the general. He moved

forward and frantically worked the hook out of the tree and carried it back to his place near the roots as fast as he could. He tied the free end of the rope to the hook and then untied the other end from the roots.

"What are you planning?" asked the general.

"I am not sure yet," answered the colonel. "The little woman said the first of the chains is coming up. That means there is more than one chain across the river. I am thinking of using the grappling hook to snare one of the chains off to the left side of our raft. If I can do that, I will pass the end of the rope to you so that you can climb it to safety."

"What about you?" asked the general.

"I will think up something else for myself," answered the colonel. "I will figure out a way to snare the second chain."

"You had better hurry then," the general replied with a sense of urgency as he pointed forward.

Rotti turned toward the front of the raft and saw the chain ahead of them. Strands of chain hung down from the main chain at intervals to enable men in the water to grab onto, but the main chain was so low that the tree would not be able to pass under it.

"Get ready to ram that chain," shouted Rotti as he grabbed the nearest root and clung to it. "We are going to stop rather abruptly."

Both men braced for the collision, but nothing happened. The colonel frowned in confusion and looked forward. His eyes widened as he saw the chain high in the air. Just above it was a tiny green man. He looked up at the creature as the tree sailed under the chain.

"They are using magic," remarked the general. "That little man is raising the chain without touching it. Unbelievable!"

Rotti agreed, but he was more concerned with getting to land. He shouted up at the little green man. "How are we to get to shore if you raise the chain out of reach?"

"Get off the tree," replied the tiny creature. "I cannot let the chain be snagged. There is another chain coming up soon."

"We can't get off the tree," Rotti shouted back. "The general cannot swim."

The chain passed overhead and then it was magically lowered. Rotti shook his head in frustration. The creature had not bothered to answer him. A moment later, the little green man darted down from the sky and hovered before the colonel.

"Did you say general?" asked the green man. "Is he General Franz or General Somma?"

"I am General Somma," stated the Spinoan general. The disappointment showed on the little creature's face. "General Franz is dead."

"He is dead?" brightened the little creature. "Then you are in

charge?”

General Somma raised an eyebrow. He had not actually thought about it, but he was indeed in charge now. He nodded.

“If you are willing to surrender,” the little man said excitedly, “I will take you to shore.”

“I am willing to surrender,” replied the general, “but I am not leaving without Colonel Rotti. You will take us both to shore.”

The creature frowned. “I can only do one at a time. I will have to come back for the colonel.”

“I can get off by myself, General,” stated Rotti. “If this creature can get you to shore without drowning you, take him up on his offer.”

“The general will not drown,” promised the little man. “I will levitate him to shore. I will come back for you, but If you wish to meet with him on shore, you must grab the third chain. I am not sure if I can return that quickly.”

Colonel Rotti nodded. “Take the general to shore, and do not mistreat him. I will get the third chain.”

The little man nodded enthusiastically and darted directly over the general. As the colonel watched, General Somma rose off the dead tree and floated towards the left bank. Before he was out of sight, another green man appeared in front of the colonel.

“I was told to bring you to shore,” stated the little man. “Are you surrendering?”

“I am,” answered the colonel. “Please take me to shore.”

Chapter 25

Surrender

Colonel Rotti felt his feet lift off the tree, and he shook his head in wonder.

“What kind of creature are you?” he asked the little green man. “If you cannot talk and carry me at the same time, no answer is required. I have had enough time in the water for one day.”

The little man laughed. “I am a fairy. I am called Drobny and carrying you is no great chore. You weigh nothing compared to the chain.”

“Are there many of your kind in Alcea?” asked the colonel.

Drobny frowned. “You are the enemy. I should not talk of such things. You will have to ask Rut-ki if you have any more questions.”

“Rut-ki?” the colonel asked with a raised eyebrow. “Is that a common name in Lanoir?”

“I do not think so,” answered the fairy. “I only know of one Rut-ki. There she is now.”

Colonel Rotti looked down at the riverbank. There were thousands of Lanoirian soldiers and hundreds of wagons, but he recognized Rut-ki instantly. Drobny set him down next to General Somma who was already talking to Rut-ki.

“The fairies can project an image of you to your soldiers,” Rut-ki said. “The message will be delivered in your own voice, with your exact words. I hope that you agree to send such a message. We do not want to kill any more of your men than we have to.”

“What will become of my men?” asked the general.

“They will be cared for,” answered the Knight of Alcea. “We have camps already set up for your men. I will not tell you the locations of the camps, but they will be fed. We will also heal any life-threatening wounds, but the number of healers is limited. When the war is over, they will be returned to their home countries.”

“That’s it?” asked Colonel Rotti. “There will be no retribution?”

“Those are my orders from King Arik of Alcea,” Rut-ki answered, a smile acknowledging the presence of the colonel. “We plan no retribution, but we will strictly enforce the imprisonment. If your men try to escape, they will be killed.”

“What do you want me to say?” asked the general.

“Tell them that you have surrendered,” answered Rut-ki. “Instruct them to abandon their weapons and use the chains to come to the left

bank. If you wish to tell them about their treatment after surrendering, do so."

"I will send the message," declared the general.

Rut-ki turned and nodded to Colonel Wu-sang, and the Lanoirian colonel came over to stand next to Rut-ki.

"General Somma has agreed to send a message to his men," Rut-ki said to the Lanoirian colonel. "I will leave him in your hands."

The colonel nodded and led General Somma away. Rut-ki turned to Colonel Rotti and smiled.

"We meet again, Rotti," she said.

"You do not appear to be the blushing bride I remember from my last journey here," retorted Colonel Rotti. "You certainly fooled me. Now you order around colonels as if you were a general. Who are you actually?"

"I am Rut-ki, and I am a Knight of Alcea. I report directly to King Arik."

"I am not sure what a Knight of Alcea is, but I can guess that I should be impressed. I certainly am impressed with the reception you prepared for us today. It shows a tremendous amount of planning, and I know that the Federation has spies in this land. The fact that you were able to hide all of this from them is a credit to your country." The colonel hesitated and his mood became more somber. "What will happen to General Somma?"

"That I cannot answer," Rut-ki replied. "He is to be kept separate from his men for now, but his ultimate fate rests in the hands of King Arik. I cannot speculate on what that might be, but know this: King Arik is a benevolent king."

"May I request to stay with him?" asked Colonel Rotti.

Rut-ki gazed questioningly at the colonel. "Are you his son?"

"I am no relation to the general," answered Colonel Rotti, "but I do care for his well-being. He is a good man who is here on no account of his own."

"Would not every Federation colonel say the same about his general?" asked Rut-ki.

"No," answered Rotti. "Most of the Federation generals have been eager for this war to begin. Somma was not one of them. In fact, the man should not be a general at all, and he knows it. Were General Franz still alive, those soldiers in the river would be trying to climb the banks to fight you Lanoirians. Certainly an easy surrender is worth something to Alcea?"

"I think the Federation soldiers should be glad that Franz is dead then," Rut-ki retorted. "I was truthful when I said that we did not wish to kill your soldiers, but let me be clear here. We would have killed every one of you if that is what was necessary."

“And you would have been right to react that way,” agreed the colonel, “but I still need to be kept with the general.”

“Why?” Rut-ki asked, the suspicious tone of her voice clearly evident.

“To protect him.”

“I said that we would not harm him,” replied Rut-ki. “Do you not believe me?”

Colonel Rotti fidgeted. It was not that he suspected that the Alceans would go back on their word that bothered the colonel. He was more concerned with what the Federation would do to him for surrendering, or even worse, what they would do if any of the other survivors saw Somma kill Franz, but he dared not speak of the other teams.

“I believe you,” declared Colonel Rotti, “but I still fear for his safety. Please allow me to remain with him. I will personally accept his punishment as my own if that is what is required.”

Rut-ki raised an eyebrow as she rolled the colonel’s words around in her mind. She knew there was something in those words to betray his meaning, but it took her a while to figure it out. When she did, she smiled at the colonel.

“You are worried about how your own people will treat General Somma for surrendering, aren’t you?”

“Something like that,” Rotti admitted with a frown. “Do you Alceans read minds? Is that how you discovered that we would be invading this way? Did you read my mind when I traveled this way last fall?”

The Knight of Alcea smiled broadly. “We do not read minds, Colonel. We knew you and Kerk were coming long before you stepped through the portals. Bin-lu and I were waiting for you to appear.”

The colonel gasped. If what Rut-ki said was true, the Alceans had to have a spy deep within the upper echelons of the Federation. Neither he nor General Somma had any idea about the portals before he was ordered to go to Alcea. If they did have such a spy in place, would they not also know about the other teams? And how could he learn the answer to that question without betraying his fellow Zarans?

Rut-ki interrupted the colonel’s thoughts. “I do not have time to play games, Colonel. Let me just dispel your fears. General Somma will not be harmed before King Arik determines his fate. He will not be harmed by us or by your people. I promise you that.”

“You are not in a position to promise that,” retorted Colonel Rotti. “You cannot control what your enemy does.”

“We cannot stop the enemy from attacking us,” agreed Rut-ki. “If we were able to control the armies of the Federation, you would not be here right now, but my promise still stands. Only the total collapse

of Alcea would allow the Federation to get their hands on General Somma, and that is not going to happen." Colonel Rotti opened his mouth to argue that point, but Rut-ki was growing tired of the games. "We know about the other teams, Rotti. They will be met with Alcean armies just like the 4th and 18th Corps were. In fact, there are one-hundred-thousand Federation soldiers already out of this war."

"Inconceivable," scoffed the colonel.

"Is this true?" asked General Somma.

Rut-ki turned to see Colonel Wu-sang and General Somma returning.

"It is true," nodded the Knight of Alcea. "The 6th and 15th Corps were totally destroyed at Pontek, and all of Force Cordonia were sent somewhere where they cannot harm anyone. They will be dealt with when the other Federation armies are vanquished."

"You said that you didn't want to kill Federation soldiers," frowned the general. "Why is it that the armies of Gattas and Montero were totally destroyed?"

"It was necessary," answered Rut-ki. "While we wish to preserve the lives of as many Zarans as possible, your countries have sent a quarter of a million men to our shores. Our primary task is to win this war. If we can do so and still preserve the lives of Zarans, we will do that, but we intend to win one way or another."

"Why is it so important to the Alceans to save our lives?" asked Colonel Rotti.

"The Federation is being used by evil forces," answered Rut-ki. "While your emperor might think this war was his idea, it was not. The minions of Alutar are manipulating him, and the Great Demon seeks the tears of millions. King Arik wants to deny Alutar those tears by not killing all of your men."

"And you could not get General Gattas to surrender," General Somma said with a nod. "I can understand that. Gattas was much like Franz. Neither of them could possibly fathom an enemy army more capable than their own. Their egos make them poor leaders of men."

Colonel Rotti turned and stared at General Somma. "Do you believe what these people are saying? I mean this nonsense about the Great Demon?"

"I do," answered the general. "I have always felt that Emperor Jaar was being manipulated. He has spent our fortunes and our futures on conquest, and for what? Before this idea of expanding the Federation started, our people had food to eat and jobs to labor at. Now our people are starving and the only jobs available are holding a sword or a bow. You tell me why we are attacking these people, Rotti? To get their food? If we Zarans spent one tenth of our energy on cultivating fields as we do on war, we would have no food shortage."

“I guess I had not looked at it that way,” confessed the colonel.

“Nor should you be expected to,” sighed the general. “A colonel’s task is the formation and training of his regiment, and you excel at that, but you will need to broaden your horizons when you are promoted to general.”

Colonel Rotti shook his head. He wondered if the bump on the head the general had received had affected his reasoning. A defeated nation has no need for generals, and if the Federation won the war, both of them would probably be executed for surrendering.

“I want to offer my services to King Arik,” General Somma said to Rut-ki. “I cannot command my men to fight against their brothers, and I will tell you now that they are unlikely to in any event, but I am willing to try to negotiate an end to the attacks in Lanoir.”

“Can you do that?” asked Rut-ki.

“Truthfully,” sighed the general, “I do not know. General Franz was the leader of Force Lanoir as well as leader of Team Chi. With him dead, I now lead Team Chi, but I am not sure about the rules regarding Force Lanoir. I might be able to talk Ruppert and Hanold into surrendering, especially if your armies can get them at a disadvantage, but General Kolling will be another matter. Being a Baroukan, I suspect he will consider himself the proper successor to General Franz as Force Leader. All four of the forces in Alcea are led by Baroukans, as if no other nation was capable of producing generals qualified for such a lofty position. That said, I will still try to get Kolling and Gertz to surrender.”

“Have you gone mad?” scowled Colonel Rotti. “You will be committing suicide.”

The general turned and stared at his colonel. “Why did you save my life today, Colonel?”

“I probably shouldn’t have bothered,” retorted Rotti. “Had I known that you would just throw it away again before the sun set, I would not have wasted my energy.”

The general smiled and when he spoke his voice was soft and caring. “You know that is not true, Rotti. Tell me the truth. Why did you go to such trouble to save me?”

The colonel sighed and shook his head. “I see good in you, General, and I didn’t want to see that good go to waste. You might be ill-suited to your profession, but the world needs more men like you.” The colonel sniffed and his eyes watered. He turned away from the general before continuing. “I guess I saw in you the father I never knew. I had to do whatever I could to protect you.”

“Even at the risk of your own life,” Somma said softly. “And you have no idea how much that meant to me, and still means to me. The point is, Rotti, you risked your life to save something that in your eyes

was worth saving. I am proposing to do exactly the same. I am willing to risk my life to save forty-thousand Federation soldiers that are only here in Lanoir because the emperor sent them here."

"Those forty-thousand men don't need saving," countered the colonel. "Either one of those teams is enough to crush Lanoir. Why throw your life away for nothing?"

Somma chuckled and Rotti looked at him with a puzzling expression.

"Perhaps I am not so ill-suited for this job after all," the general said jovially. "You and I seem to have very different expectations on the odds facing the other teams. You see two massive armies marching towards Ongchi from different directions and crushing the Lanoirian capital between them like a vise. I see no such thing. I know the strategies of the Federation quite well, and I suspect that the Alceans do as well. The unknown part of this equation is the strategy employed by the Alceans. It should be obvious to you by now, that we Zarans do not have a clue. That dam was one of the finest traps I have ever heard of. If the Alceans were not intent on capturing the survivors, they could have pulled this off with less than one-thousand men. Our two armies would have ceased to exist. Do you really think these same Alceans have no plans for the other armies? Do you take them for incompetent fools?"

Rut-ki and Colonel Wu-sang stood observing the entire conversation in silence. The Knight of Alcea watched both of the Federation officers closely, trying to peer into their minds based upon what she was seeing and hearing. When the last two questions were asked, Colonel Rotti turned to Rut-ki.

"What do you have planned for the other armies?" he asked. "Do you really have a chance of surviving the coming battles?"

"I am not willing to share such information," answered Rut-ki. "I will say this much, though. Generals Ruppert and Hanold will soon walk into a trap, and like you, they will have a choice to make. They will surrender, or they will perish. I hope that they choose to surrender, but either way, they will no longer be in this war. As for Kolling and Gertz, they are walking towards Ongchi. They have no horses. They have no food. They have no black-cloaks. Their foraging parties are constantly being harassed, and they are behind schedule. They will not arrive at Ongchi by the thirteenth day. I will say no more about it."

Colonel Rotti glanced at General Somma and found him grinning. He nodded at the general and smiled back before returning his eyes to Rut-ki.

"I made a request of you a short while ago," Rotti said. "You told me that the general's life would not be in danger, but we both now

know that those words are no longer true. I make my request once more."

"Do you suddenly agree with the general's views?" asked the Knight of Alcea.

"I do," replied the colonel, "and I apologize to you for once more underestimating you. If those men can be saved by surrendering, I will endeavor to help General Somma talk them into it."

"While you keep him safe?" grinned Rut-ki.

"While I keep him safe," echoed the colonel.

* * * *

General Ross looked up as the tent flap moved aside. He motioned the black-cloak forward and waved him towards a chair across the table. Baku silently walked to the chair and sat down.

"Have you discovered anything useful?" asked the general. "Are we any closer to discovering where this Cordonia is that we are in?"

"No," reported the black-cloak, "but there are developments to report. We have lost three more mages, one from the 19th Corps and two from the 20th Corps."

"Are you sure that they are dead?" asked General Ross. "Is it possible that they found something and decided to stay there and investigate it?"

Baku frowned. "Anything is possible," he sighed, "but I am growing concerned. That is now nine of my people that are missing. I could understand one or two of them doing something stupid, but not nine of them. I think something is hunting them."

The general's forehead creased as he considered the words used by the mage. He found it curious that Baku used the word something rather than someone, and the reference to being hunted signified a creature of some intelligence. The general had no idea what kind of power it might take to slay a black-cloak, but he knew that Baku was upset, and that concerned Ross.

"Perhaps you should start having your people patrol in pairs," suggested the general.

"I have already issued that order," replied Baku.

"What else do you have for me?"

"There have been people in this land before," answered the black-cloak, "although it may have been years ago. One of my men was searching beyond the West Mountains and found some old stone fire rings. There were also trees with obvious hatchet marks on them, but the marks were overgrown. He thought they might be as much as twenty years old."

"Nothing more recent?" asked General Ross.

The black-cloak shook his head.

Far to the east, among the peaks of the West Mountains, two

Alcean Rangers sat in the shadows, gazing out over the vast plains of land known as Cordonia in their Universe.

“The black-cloaks are traveling in pairs now,” reported the corporal. “That is going to make it impossible to continue killing them without being detected. I think we need to start teaming up ourselves. No one man can get off two arrows quickly enough to kill two black-cloaks.”

Captain Steffen nodded silently as he watched the sun sliding towards the distant horizon. When he eventually spoke, it was with a tone of contemplative hesitancy. “The problem is much worse than that Kojar. In this sector, they have not only paired up, but one of them remains high in the sky while the other swoops down to investigate. No archer will be effective against such a wary stance as the higher one will be beyond an archer's range. We have hurt the black-cloaks considerably, and they are not used to feeling vulnerable. Killing the remaining fifteen mages will require new tactics.”

“What are you thinking?” frowned the corporal. “Surely, you do not plan to raid their camps at night while they are sleeping? There are only ten of us.”

The captain shook his head, but his eyes sparkled as if a sudden thought had come to mind that pleased him. “We still have the dragon. If the attack was timed correctly, a Ranger could kill the black-cloak who swoops down to investigate, while the dragon snares the mage flying high in the sky.”

Corporal Kojar shook his head vigorously. “Dragons are forbidden to eat humans,” he protested. “King Arik would not be pleased if we ordered Kinelli to abandon that directive. The dragon is here solely to scare the Federation soldiers.”

“Kinelli would not be attacking a human,” Captain Steffen replied with a slight smile. “She would be attacking a bird. Besides, she need not devour the black-cloak. All she has to do is kill it.”

The corporal thought for a moment, but he still appeared to dislike the idea. “There is only one dragon,” he pointed out, “and ten of us. That would require Kinelli to spend a great deal of time in the air traveling from one of us to another. She would surely be spotted and tracked, and her travels would eventually reveal our locations.”

“We would have to abandon all of the other posts and concentrate on one area,” replied the captain. “As wary as the black-cloaks are now, they will start plotting where their people go missing. They will then spend more efforts investigating that particular sector.”

“Yes, they will,” agreed the corporal, “but that may not be to our advantage. They may end up sending more than just two mages to investigate. Remember, while we can kill the black-cloaks easily in their bird forms, just one of those mages in human form could kill all

of us quickly. We have no mage of our own."

"Then we must choose the battleground carefully," replied Captain Steffen. "We will need a steep canyon with ample hiding spots among the vertical cliffs. We will lure the black-cloaks down into the canyon so that even if some of them remain high in the sky, they will be within range of our arrows."

"That just might work," mused Corporal Kojar, "and if one remains even higher, Kinelli can take care of him. I will search the West Mountains for just such a location."

"No." Captain Steffen smiled with a sparkle in his eyes. "Find us a spot in the Boulder Mountains. The black-cloaks continue to search ever farther from their base camps. If we can lure them far enough away from the Federation soldiers, they will not have time to return to camp each day. At that point, they will be forced to set up their own camp for the night."

"Leaving us with an opportunity to sneak into their makeshift camp and finish them off," grinned the corporal. "Either we lure them into a canyon of no return, or we strike while they are sleeping. Either way, they all die. I like it, Steffen."

Chapter 26

No Rest for the Weary

Night had fallen over the Lanoirian camp on the banks of the Chi River, and General Somma sighed wearily as he turned away from the sight of the last prisoner wagon leaving the banks. It had been a long and harrowing day for the Spinoan general, and he was ready for some sleep. He made his way to the command tent of Colonel Wu-sang. He opened the flap and paused as he glanced around the room. Colonel Rotti sat at a large table with Colonel Wu-sang. Both men were eating the evening meal, and the general crossed the room and sat down. Colonel Rotti rose immediately and dashed off to get food for his general.

"You look tired, General," Colonel Wu-sang said sympathetically. "You should have gotten some sleep hours ago."

"It was my duty to make sure that all of my men were treated well as they were sent off to the prison camps," answered the Federation general.

The Lanoirian colonel nodded in understanding. He could have retorted that the Alceans had no intention of harming the prisoners, but he knew that the Spinoan general was aware of that. General Somma was merely trying to fulfill his obligation as a general, and Wu-sang admired him for that.

"They will be safe," the colonel said reassuringly. "I have had mats set up in this tent for you and Colonel Rotti. If you need anything, you only have to ask. My men have been instructed to extend to you every courtesy possible."

"You have been a most gracious victor," General Somma replied as Colonel Rotti entered the tent and placed a plate of food before the general. "I know that my men will be cared for properly."

Colonel Rotti sat down, and the room lapsed into silence as the general ate his meal. Several minutes later, the flap moved again and Rut-ki entered the tent carrying two sheathed swords. She handed one to Colonel Rotti and placed the other on the table near General Somma. The general nodded his thanks wordlessly and continued eating, but Colonel Rotti stared at the sword suspiciously and then glanced at Rut-ki questioningly.

"Why are you giving this to me?" the Spinoan colonel asked.

"An officer without a sword will be seen as a prisoner," answered Rut-ki. "I want your comrades to understand that you have

volunteered to work alongside the Alceans. It will better help them to understand that you are truly trying to save their lives."

"She is right," mumbled the general as he pushed his plate away, the strain of fatigue evident in his face. "Appearances will be important tomorrow."

"As will having your wits about you," frowned Colonel Rotti. "You need to get some sleep, General. Morning will come all too quickly."

"We will be leaving within the hour," declared Rut-ki as she placed a belt knife on the table. "I found this knife embedded in the body of General Franz. I believe it belongs to one of you?"

Colonel Rotti's eyes widened nervously. He reflexively glanced at the general and immediately tore his eyes away. He reached for the knife and claimed it.

"It is my knife," he admitted. "Thank you for its return."

"I killed Franz," confessed General Somma. "Do not let this young pup suffer on my account. Whatever crime that death constitutes, I will stand for its punishment after we manage to get the other Federation armies to surrender. Rotti had no hand in the slaying. How did you know it belonged to one of us?"

"Several of your men witnessed the attack," answered Rut-ki. She did not add that those men thought more highly of Somma for having done the deed.

Anxious to change the subject, Colonel Rotti asked, "Why are we leaving tonight? The general is in great need of rest."

"It is best if we travel at night," Rut-ki answered. "The general can sleep along the way, but we have a great distance to cover before morning. I will wait outside for you. We will leave as soon as both of you are ready."

Rut-ki turned and left the tent. Colonel Rotti picked up his sword and pulled the sheath over his head. He frowned as he looked around the big tent. Colonel Wu-sang appeared quite at ease with two enemy officers in his midst, and the delivery of the swords did not even raise an objection from him. There were no other Lanoirian soldiers in sight. He shook his head in confusion.

"It is obvious that you do not expect us to use these swords," Rotti said as his confusion built to an unbearable level. "I can imagine that our escort will be quite numerous tonight, but you do not even seem concerned about being alone with us. Why is that? What am I missing?"

"Perhaps you have not yet learned to trust us," Colonel Wu-sang said with a laconic smile. "Having survived a harrowing day, would you foolishly endanger your lives now merely to kill one insignificant Lanoirian colonel? As for your escort tonight, you and the general will

be traveling with just Rut-ki. A Knight of Alcea needs no further escort."

"I have heard that phrase before," commented General Somma. "What exactly is a Knight of Alcea?"

"A Knight of Alcea is one of the most dangerous people in the world," answered Colonel Wu-sang. "The Knights of Alcea are the world's best warriors and magicians. There are only about a dozen of them, and they report only to King Arik and no one else. Rut-ki is one of them."

"That little slip of a woman?" gasped Colonel Rotti. "You can't be serious?"

All traces of humor fled from Wu-sang's face. "You once again are underestimating your opponent, Colonel. Rut-ki was an instructor of martial arts in the Imperial Palace of Lanoir before she became a Knight of Alcea. She would need no weapon at all to dispatch the three of us if it became necessary. Cling to your sword and knife if they give you comfort, but do not even think of raising either one with malicious intent. You would not live long enough to use it."

The Lanoirian colonel rose and stiffly exited the tent. Rotti looked at Somma questioningly.

"He seemed offended," the colonel remarked.

"He was offended," sighed General Somma as he slung his sheath over his head. "I imagine that Rut-ki is a provincial hero to the Lanoirians, and you have discounted her worth. The Alceans have been extremely gracious to us. Why do you keep testing them?"

"I do not know," admitted the colonel. "I met Rut-ki last fall, General. She portrayed herself as a blushing bride, her new husband a poor fisherman. I can see now that it was just an act to get close to Kerk and me, but it was very convincing. It is just hard to think of her as some kind of great warrior."

"Was the fisherman called Bin-lu?" asked the general.

"Yes," nodded Rotti. "How did you know?"

"Bin-lu is also a Knight of Alcea," answered General Somma. "He and Rut-ki designed the trap that snared our armies. I had the chance to talk with Wu-sang this afternoon, and I asked him about the dam. The Lanoirians had thousands of men working on it all winter, and all of this was done just because Bin-lu and Rut-ki demanded it. That proves to me that the Lanoirians take these Knights of Alcea very seriously. I suggest that we do the same. Now, I am really in need of sleep, so the sooner we get started on this journey, the sooner I can get some sleep. If you are ready, I would like to leave now."

Colonel Rotti immediately stood and sheathed his knife. When General Somma rose to his feet, the two officers exited the tent to find Rut-ki standing with three saddled horses. She handed reins to each of

the men and then mounted her horse.

"This is silly," Colonel Rotti thought as he mounted the horse. "No matter how great a fighter Rut-ki might be, she can't possible stop both Spinoans from merely riding away from her during the night's journey."

You have much to learn, Zaran. You are not in control.

The words had sounded inside the colonel's head, and he glanced around in alarm. The voice had been feminine, but the only female in the area was Rut-ki, and she was not even paying any attention to the colonel. Rotti gazed upward in search of one of the fairy people, but the voice had been too full-bodied to be a fairy. He pulled on the reins to turn the horse around so he could get a better view behind him, but the horse refused to obey his commands.

The feminine voice chuckled in his mind.

"I am confused," said General Somma as he mounted his horse. "Team Elmor should be traveling along the coast. It will take us days to reach them, especially if we only travel at night, but you indicated that a trap awaited them tomorrow. How can we possible be there in time?"

"We will be with Bin-lu in a couple of hours," smiled Rut-ki as she mounted her horse. "You may sleep on the way if you wish. Your unicorn will not let you fall."

Rut-ki's mount sprouted wings and leaped into the air. General Somma's mount immediately mimicked Rut-ki's unicorn and Colonel Rotti's jaw fell as he watched the magnificent beasts take to the air.

If you plan on running away, Zaran, now is your last chance. Leaving the saddle up in the sky is not a wise choice.

The third unicorn leaped into the air. Colonel Rotti gripped the saddle tightly, and his eyes widened as he looked down at the receding ground.

I hope you are not afraid of heights, giggled the feminine voice. *I can't stand nervous legs constantly pounding on my sides.*

Colonel Rotti stared at the unicorn's head in wonder. "Are you talking to me?" he asked out loud.

Is there someone else upon my back? quipped the unicorn.

Colonel Rotti shook his head as if to wake himself from the dream. He glanced down at the tiny moonlit strand of water that was the mighty Chi River and inhaled deeply. He could not believe what he was seeing. But it was more than merely what he was seeing. He could feel the bite of the wind against his face, and he could hear the powerful strokes of the creature's mighty wings. He glanced once more at the back of the unicorn's head.

"Where is your horn?" Colonel Rotti asked. "If unicorns truly do exist, they are supposed to have horns."

Must everything be proved to you? taunted the unicorn as she made her horn appear. *One would think that such skepticism would have shown itself much sooner. Like maybe when you agreed to attack a country that you truly knew nothing about. Where was your skepticism then?*

Colonel Rotti stared in awe at the spiral horn just in front of him. He closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them again, wondering if anything would change. Nothing changed. For a while he sat silently, letting the unicorn's taunt sink in.

"I guess that I have been a fool," the colonel sighed softly. "I do not know which comes as more of a shock, whether it be riding a mythical unicorn through the night sky or being lectured by one."

Well, chuckled the unicorn, *you are doubly blessed this night. We have a couple of hours to go before reaching Hun-lo Heights, and I can lecture on any number of topics. Perhaps we should start by discussing the proper degree of respect to be shown to the Knights of Alcea*.

* * * *

Corporal Chitor made his way through the encampment of the 21st Corps of Spino. He glanced uneasily at the trees marking the perimeter of the camp and sat down next to Sergeant Turang.

"Can't you get us a site deeper into the camp?" the corporal asked softly.

"Sites are assigned at the regimental level," replied the sergeant. "What difference does it make where we sleep?"

"We are too close to the perimeter, complained the corporal. "The dwarves would overrun us before the rest of the camp was even alerted."

"Don't start with the dwarves again," scowled the sergeant. "I am not in the mood."

"It's not just me," retorted Corporal Chitor. "Well over a hundred men saw the dwarves today. The whole camp is talking about it. Why is it that you are the only person who is trying to deny their existence?"

"I am not the only one," snapped the sergeant. "You will not find an officer in this entire camp that believes in dwarves. In fact, I heard that General Ritka is threatening to make an example out of the next person who reports seeing a dwarf. You would be wise to keep your mouth shut."

"I can't believe that not a single officer saw the dwarves today," countered the corporal. "Men from every single company saw them. It is not possible for all of the officers to have missed seeing at least one dwarf. Do they travel with their eyes closed?"

Sergeant Turang sighed and stared at the ground. "Look, Chitor," he said softly, "you and I both know that the dwarves are out there, but the officers cannot admit that. They cannot allow the soldiers of

the 21st Corps or the 29th Corps to get frightened silly. They have to maintain order and discipline and that means that they will make an example out of someone. Keep your mouth shut or that someone might be you."

Corporal Chitor frowned deeply. "I understand what you are saying, Turang, but not talking about them doesn't make the dwarves go away. The generals are doing nothing about the situation. I am positive that the dwarves are probably right out there now looking at us sitting here. All I am asking is if you can figure out a way to get our site moved deeper into the camp. At least we would have a fighting chance when those creatures attack."

"And what do you think the generals should be doing?" grumbled the sergeant. "Do you want them to send patrols out? Do you want to be in one of those patrols? Think about the results of your complaining before you speak. If another squad leader heard you talking, he would be recommending you for just such a patrol, and me and the rest of the squad would get to reap your punishment. Just shut your trap about the dwarves."

The corporal's eyes grew large, and he seemed to have trouble swallowing. He glanced at the dark trees beyond the perimeter, and his body shuddered.

"I'll keep my mouth shut," vowed the corporal, "but I still think you should try for a better campsite tomorrow night."

The sergeant sighed again and picked up a rock as he rose to his feet. "I actually did try for a better site tonight," the sergeant said softly. "It seems that every squad leader wanted to be in the center of the camp. Colonel Pierce was not happy with the requests. He was the officer who brought up the dwarves and the threat by General Ritka to make an example out of someone. They all know about the dwarves, Chitor. They are just lying to us so we don't get nervous and start thinking about deserting."

"I wouldn't fancy deserting and being alone in those woods," Corporal Chitor replied nervously. "If I did desert, I would turn around and run as fast as I could back to the portal. I don't want to be in Alcea any more."

"The portals are gone," the sergeant said softly. "I overheard a cavalry captain telling the general about it. Both portals were ripped out of the walls."

"Ripped out of the walls?" gasped Chitor.

"Probably by dwarves," nodded the sergeant. "I can't imagine the strength of a creature who could just rip a door out of a wall, but that is what the captain reported."

"Interesting that the generals sent riders out to check on the portals," mused the corporal. "Do you think the generals were

thinking about heading back home?"

"I don't know," answered Sergeant Turang, "but I know they are worried about the dwarves. Colonel Pierce had suggested sending the cavalry out to capture one of the dwarves to interrogate, but General Ritka squashed the idea. He was afraid that the cavalry wouldn't return and that the effect of that loss would devastate morale."

"So we just do nothing?" balked the corporal. "Sooner of later we will have to meet those creatures. You have to know that the dwarves are just biding their time. I don't look forward to fighting them, but I would rather do so on our terms than theirs."

"As long as you had twenty-thousand men clumped around you?" scoffed the sergeant.

Corporal Chitor shrugged and nodded. "If you mean that I am afraid to face the dwarves, you are right. I admit it, but this waiting every day for them to finally attack is far worse than fighting. I wish they would just kill us and get it over with."

"I am not ready to die," the sergeant scowled. "Maybe we should just kill them instead."

With frustration, the sergeant turned and hurled the rock into the trees. It was merely his way to ease the tension by using force in some way, but his eyes widened as he heard the rock strike something metal. The rest of the men near the perimeter also heard the noise in the woods, and they all jumped to their feet. Their act of alarm saved the sergeant's life. Something shiny shot out of the trees, firelight glinting off its polished surface. The object tumbled end over end in a fast and furious flight that ended in a solid thump and a gurgle as one of Sergeant Turang's men fell to his knees. The stricken soldier teetered on his knees before falling to the ground, a small polished ax protruding from his chest.

Shouting erupted in the camp, and the soldiers all dropped to the ground rather than grabbing their bows and firing in defense as they had been trained to do. The sergeant cursed loudly when he realized that he was the only man standing, but none of his men rose to their feet. As much as they feared to be punished by the sergeant, they feared the dwarves more. Sergeant Turang walked to the fallen man and pulled the small throwing ax out of the soldier's chest. He glanced at the ax and then gazed into the trees. He imagined a grinning dwarf hiding in the darkness as he raised his hand in a defiant gesture.

"Are you crazy?" Corporal Chitor called up to him from the ground. "You do not stand in the open and insult a dwarf when he is only a few paces away. Get down!"

The sergeant shrugged. "He already threw his ax. If he wants to fight, he will have to come out of the shadows."

"You are nuts, Turang," retorted Chitor. "They have a dozen of

those small axes hanging from their belts. Besides, it might not be just one dwarf."

The sergeant's face paled as he understood what the corporal was telling him. He felt a great need to immediately drop to the ground, but soldiers came running from deeper in the camp to see what was happening, saving the sergeant from embarrassment. As the first of the soldiers arrived, the sergeant casually stepped back, keeping at least one of the new arrivals between him and the trees at all times.

* * * *

General Kolling stepped out of the column as it stumbled to a halt. Whatever the problem was, the general was sure that Colonel Ednor would advise him shortly. As the Baroukan general waited, he gazed up at the night sky and shook his head with disappointment. The moon should have been bright this night, but angry clouds drifting over the coast had darkened its glow and eradicated the stars. He cursed his bad luck, and he cursed night marches.

"General Kolling," Colonel Ednor said when he had located the leader of Team Barouk, "we have trouble. The enemy has destroyed a bridge ahead."

"Why am I not surprised?" scowled the general. "I wish these Alceans would just come out and fight like men. Is the river fordable?"

"It is," answered the colonel, "but I ordered the column stopped. I have men searching upstream and downstream for a more suitable crossing point."

"Why?" frowned the general. "If we can get across it, why bother searching for alternatives?"

"It doesn't feel right to me, General. We have crossed dozens of streams and rivers, and the enemy ignored those bridges. I think this particular bridge might hold some significance to the Alceans. I thought it would be wiser to search out alternatives than to play the hand dealt by the enemy."

"We are already far behind schedule," snapped the general. "Get our men across that river, and do it now."

"As you command," replied Colonel Ednor. "I will see to it immediately."

The Baroukan colonel turned and ran towards the vanguard of the column. When he arrived, he stopped and gazed at the ford as he tried to catch his breath. The opposite shore of the river was dark, the forest extending to the edge of the riverbank. The colonel frowned as he surveyed it. The river itself was running swiftly, but it was neither a great torrent nor exceedingly deep. He turned and waved a captain forward. The captain hurried to the colonel's side and gazed across the river.

"I want your company to get across the river and set up a

defensive perimeter on the opposite shore," commanded the colonel. "Signal me when the bank is secure."

The captain saluted the colonel and retreated to his men. Moments later, one hundred Federation soldiers gathered on the near bank of the river. The captain's hushed orders were brief and the men of the company nodded in understanding. One squad immediately moved down the bank and into the river while the other four squads stood with arrows nocked. The lead squad moved quietly out into the river, expecting trouble from unseen foes, but nothing happened. The squad slowly made their way across the river and climbed up the opposite bank. The twenty men spread out, creating a semicircular zone of protection for the rest of the company. When the short perimeter was established, the squad leader signaled the captain to send over the rest of the company. Four more squads slid down the bank and into the river, their arrows secured in their quivers, and their bows strapped to their backs.

The larger part of the company was halfway across the river when the enemy struck. All twenty of the first squad fell in the first volley of arrows. The second volley of arrows was already speeding towards the men in the river before anyone understood what was happening.

"Archers!" shouted Colonel Ednor. "I want withering fire on the opposite shore, and I want it now!"

The men in the river were caught midstream. Some of them tried to complete the trek across the river while others turned and tried to flee. Some even tried to nock arrows midstream and fight the unseen enemy, but all of the choices made were illusory grasps at the unobtainable. Within seconds of the opening barrage, all of the men were dead. The Federation archers in the vanguard of the column stepped up to the riverbank and fired volley after volley of arrows into the dark forest, but silence was the only victim. After a few minutes, Colonel Ednor gave the order to stop shooting, and an eerie stillness fell over the river. The colonel turned to select another company to attempt the crossing, but he frowned as he gazed at the men standing before him. Of the four captains who had gathered near the river when the column had halted, none of them were currently visible. The vanguard of the mighty 9th Corps of the Empire of Barouk had suddenly become bereft of company commanders.

Chapter 27

Day Nine

As General Pryblick, commander of the 8th Corps of the Empire of Barouk and team leader for Team Danver Shores, approached the rendezvous place, he noticed the crude sign on the side of the road. He shook his head and then turned his gaze to the assembled officers waiting for him. General Mackle, commander of the 12th Corps of Ertak, was already present, but Pryblick ignored the other general and rode straight towards his own colonel.

"What is the meaning of that, Dukirk?" General Pryblick asked as he pointed to the crude sign. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"Not unless it is an Alcean joke, General," replied the colonel. "None of our men would dare to do such a thing. I have sent two men on ahead to verify the condition of the bridge."

"Two men?" balked the general. "We are in enemy territory, Colonel. Why didn't you send a company?"

"A whole company of cavalry would surely be noticed," answered Colonel Dukirk. "Two riders will not. If we are forced to take another route, it would make no sense to alert the enemy of our arrival on a path that we will not be traveling."

"Another route?" frowned the general. "Just because a bridge is out? We will ford the river."

"I am familiar with the road to Tagaret, General," replied the colonel. "If that bridge is indeed out, it would make no sense to travel that road. The river is not fordable. In fact, the bridge crosses a rather steep canyon. I did instruct the men to search upstream and downstream for potential fords, but I am not optimistic about them finding any. Last fall I spent some time on that bridge looking in both directions. The canyon runs deep as far as the eye can see. If the bridge is no longer passable, we will need to take the other road."

"And what about our supplies?" asked General Pryblick.

"We are not going to be able to reach the first cache," answered Colonel Dukirk, "but I think we should be able to get back to the main road for the second cache."

"You think?" scowled the general.

The colonel sighed. "I have not been on the secondary road, but I do remember seeing quite a few side roads north of the bridge. One of them must connect the two roads. We really have little choice, General. If we do not take the secondary road, we will not be in

Tagaret when the attack begins."

"Maybe we can return to Camp Destiny and get supplies from Tauman," suggested General Mackle.

General Pryblick whirled around to find that the Ertakan general had come up behind him.

"There were no ready supplies anywhere near my portal," the Baroukan general said testily. "Were there any near yours?"

"No," General Mackle answered calmly, "but at least we would have provisions that way."

"At what cost?" snapped General Pryblick. "We will lose a whole day waiting for Tauman to deliver supplies to the staging areas so that we can then cart them through the portals and deliver them to our men. I will not put this team in the position of having to make up for a lost day. Do not forget, Mackle, that our journey is the shortest of all of the teams. We only have five days to make it to Tagaret, and I will not start out by losing one of those five days. We could never make it up, and I will not be late for the attack."

"Then we will have to forage," shrugged the Ertakan general.

"Then we forage," General Pryblick replied with an air of finality. "Colonel Dukirk, get the column moving along the secondary road. If your riders return with good news, we will reverse the column and head towards whatever fords they discovered."

The colonel saluted and rode off to start the march towards Tagaret. General Pryblick invited General Mackle to ride alongside him in the vanguard, and the column veered off the main road and onto the secondary road.

"This road has seen better days," commented General Mackle, "but there has been quite a bit of wagon traffic recently. If wagons can use it to reach Tagaret, we should have no problems."

"Except for the supplies," Pryblick agreed with a tone of resignation. "I just do not like surprises. That bridge must have collapsed in the last two weeks. General Tauman assured me that all of our caches had been checked before the armies started deploying to Alcea, and that was only nine days ago."

"Well," mused General Mackle, "it is springtime and the annual floods do cause havoc with bridges. Let's just hope that the bridge is the worst of our problems."

"I am sure that it will be," the Baroukan general said with confidence. "Force Targa is the cream of the Federation armies. If our three teams can't destroy Tagaret, no armies can. That is why a potential delay irritates me so. I will not let Fortella and Bledsoe get all the credit for sacking the Alcean capital. We will be on time to join in, no matter what it takes."

"I can't imagine any city standing up to the force of our three

teams," agreed the Ertakan general. "This will be the shortest siege in history."

Less than an hour later, the vanguard of Team Danver Shores came upon two new bridges. The bridges sat side-by-side, and they crossed a wide expanse of muddy river.

"Those bridges are new," remarked General Mackle. "I wonder why they built two of them?"

"Perhaps they don't want this road closed like the main road," shrugged General Pryblick. "Whatever their reasons, I am glad that there are two. They are narrow enough to cause us delay if there had only been one. We will use both of them. You lead the left files across one, and I will lead the right files across the other. We will join up on the other side."

The massive Federation army split in two for the journey across the river. As the generals met up on the far side of the bridges, Colonel Dukirk joined them.

"The riders returned," stated the colonel. "As I suspected, there were no decent fords available within any acceptable distance from the bridge. You have made a wise choice, General."

"That only shows that you were observant last fall, Dukirk. Knowing the terrain can be very helpful, but your knowledge no longer helps us as you have not traveled this road before. Take some riders and scout ahead. Find us a place to make camp tonight, and make the day's trek a bit longer than we had planned for. That way if we have more surprises in store, we will be ahead of schedule."

* * * *

Alexander Tork entered his suite in the Royal Palace in Tagaret and found Jenneva getting ready to leave.

"So, you awaken from the dead," Alex quipped with a smile. "I was beginning to think that you would sleep all day."

"Don't tempt me," retorted Jenneva. "I feel as if I just went to sleep. What hour is it?"

"Just after dawn," replied Alex. "You must have worked late into the night again. Are you making any progress with the plague?"

"Not really," frowned Jenneva, "although we now have more help. Quite a few healers responded to the queen's summons. Podil was among them."

"Podil?" frowned Alex. "She was supposed to be with Zalaharic, but I notice that you did not mention him as being among those who showed up."

"He stayed with Wylan and Sheri," answered Jenneva with a curious look at her husband. "They are alive. Did you not know?"

"Alive?" Alex echoed in a whisper, his voice quaking with hesitant hope. "Can it be true?"

“It is true,” smiled Jenneva. “Podil said that Wylan will be as good as new after he gets some rest.”

Alex stepped forward and hugged Jenneva. “I cannot imagine a brighter start to a day. What about Sheri?”

“Podil is not sure about Sheri,” Jenneva replied softly. “She hangs in a state somewhere between life and death. That is why Zalaharic decided to ignore the king’s orders to return to Tagaret.”

“As he should,” Alex stated firmly. “I am sure that Arik would have agreed if he had been there. Did Podil think that Zalaharic could save her?”

“That is a question she would be unable to answer,” Jenneva replied as she broke the embrace. “If anyone can save her, it is Zalaharic. As for the king, Arik was awakened when Podil arrived. He was pleased that Zalaharic saw the importance of saving two Knights of Alcea. I am surprised that he did not tell you.”

“I have not seen Arik yet this morning,” replied Alex. “He is sequestered in his study with Balamor. I think they are rehearsing the king’s message to the citizens.”

“And not a day too soon,” commented Jenneva. “The citizens are starting to ask why they haven’t heard from the king. Some wonder if he might have been stricken with the plague, but others wonder if he still cares about them.”

“That is just silly,” scowled Alex. “Have they no memories of the sacrifices that Arik has made for them? How could they possibly think he has forgotten them?”

Jenneva sighed. “Do not be so harsh towards them, Alex. The people are frightened, and they have every right to be scared. While the details of the coming invasion are not well known, the citizens do know that an attack is coming. They can see that half of the soldiers are as sick as they are, and it terrifies them. It is Arik’s responsibility to inform the people about such things.”

“Those soldiers were supposed to march out through the city gates this morning,” frowned Alex. “They are needed against Team Miram.”

“They may be needed,” replied Jenneva, “but they will not be leaving the city. The Rangers and the Red Swords will have to manage without them.”

“Four-thousand men against twenty-thousand?” balked Alex. “Even if they are successful against such odds, there will not be enough of our men left to form a bucket brigade. The Rangers and the Red Swords will cease to exist. Does Arik know what that will mean when Team Mya arrives at our walls?”

“He has no choice, Alex,” retorted Jenneva. “He cannot send sick men into battle.”

“And what about mages?” asked Alex. “There are twenty-four battle mages in Team Miram. Are our men supposed to go up against them, too?”

Jenneva sighed again. “I don’t know, Alex. Right now we have every available mage working as healers. Even the queen spends long days in the infirmary. We just don’t have the number of mages that the Federation has.”

Alex turned from his wife and began pacing the floor. Jenneva knew her husband well enough to understand what was going through his mind.

“Before you go rushing off to single-handedly defeat the enemy,” she said sympathetically, “talk to Arik. See if he can’t spare some mages to accompany you.”

Alex stopped pacing and turned to look at his wife. “I would be happy if he allowed me just one mage. Come with me, Jenneva.”

Jenneva’s brow creased heavily, and her gaze dropped to the floor. “Defeating the enemy serves no purpose if all of the citizens die of the plague. Get your leave from Arik and go join your brothers on the battlefield. I will join you as soon as we get the populace out of danger.”

Alex nodded sadly and embraced his wife in silence. He understood her dedication to healing the people as much as she understood his need to be on the battlefield. For several minutes, neither one of them spoke. They stood in a silent embrace as if savoring their last time together. Abruptly, Alex broke the embrace and kissed Jenneva.

“Hurry north,” he said softly as he turned and left the room.

The walk to the king’s study was not a long one. As Alex arrived outside the door, he met Tanya coming from the other direction. She looked as tired as Jenneva had, and he smiled weakly at her.

“Is there any hope in sight?” he asked.

“I don’t know, Father,” the queen replied with a shake of her head. “I find that I am seeing the same patients over and over again. I treat them and they get well, but they come back again, sometimes in only a matter of hours. It is unlike any illness I have ever seen. I also question its contagiousness. Not a single helper in the infirmary has contracted the disease from the patients. It is weird.”

“And are all of the patients irritable?” asked Alex.

“Without exception,” nodded the queen.

Sudden shouting from beyond the door caused both father and daughter to turn towards the door with concerned looks on their face.

“Has the king been shouting all morning?” the queen asked one of the guards stationed at the door.

“This is the first time that we have heard him,” answered the

guard. “Should we investigate?”

“No.” The queen shook her head. “My father and I will see what the trouble is. Open the door.”

The guard dutifully opened the door to the king’s study and the queen promptly entered the room. Alex followed closely behind her, and the guard closed the door. King Arik stood before his desk, regally dressed as if he were making a public appearance. The red-headed illusionist from Pog stood on the other side of the room. King Arik turned towards the door when it opened, his face a mask of rage.

“We are busy here,” snapped the king. “This is no time for social calls.”

Queen Tanya stared at the king and then at Balamor. The gaunt mage merely shrugged. The queen turned to her left and walked until her husband was directly between her and Balamor. Alex halted just inside the door. His eyes flickered from the illusionist to the king, but he said nothing.

“What is going on, Arik?” Queen Tanya asked in a disarming tone.

“What is going on?” snapped the king. “What do you think is going on? I am trying to deliver a speech to the citizens, but you seem intent on disrupting it. Leave us.”

“When did this start?” Alex asked Balamor.

King Arik whirled towards Alex with a hateful glare. “I said leave,” he shouted. “That includes you, Alex.”

The Knight of Alcea ignored the king. He stood staring at Balamor, waiting for an answer to his question.

“Just a few moments ago,” answered the mage from Pog. “We were making great progress and then I suggested that the king dress appropriately. His mood turned black almost instantly.”

“I will not be ignored!” shouted the king. “Guards!”

The door started to open and then slammed shut with a force that shook the wall. Alex glanced at Tanya, and the queen nodded that she was responsible for closing the door. He turned his gaze back to the king, his eyes lingering on the king’s new boots. Suddenly, Alex’s eyebrow rose in wonder.

“Take off your boots, Arik,” demanded the Knight of Alcea.

The king shouted for the guards again as he tried to pull the Sword of Heavens from its sheath on his back. The sword flew out of its sheath and hovered near the ceiling. The king turned towards his wife with an angry glare. That is when the Knight of Alcea struck. Alex raced across the room and pushed the king onto the desk, pinning him with the weight of his body. Balamor rushed to the king and pulled the boots off the king’s dangling feet. Alex knew that the boots were off without having to turn and look. The king’s angry

facade immediately broke, and the king looked up into Alex's face with wonder and confusion. Alex released the king and stepped back.

"It is the boots," announced Alex. "Have the guards bring Prince Oscar here."

Tanya nodded as she gently lowered the Sword of Heavens to the floor. She walked towards the door before releasing her hold on it. The door burst open, and the queen stared at twenty Red Swords with their swords drawn.

"Summon Prince Oscar immediately," demanded the queen, "and admit no one else."

The guards peered past the queen and saw the king sitting on the edge of the desk. One of them ran off to get the prince, but the others stood unmoving, waiting for the king's personal dismissal.

"Close the door," commanded the king with a dismissive wave, "and send the others back to their posts."

The guards sheathed their swords and hesitated only briefly before complying with the king's orders. Tanya turned away from the door and walked to Balamor. She took one of the boots from the gaunt mage and examined it closely.

"Are we sure it is the boots?" she asked with hesitancy.

Alex pulled his sword and handed it to the king. He then took the boots from Balamor and Tanya and moved to a chair to remove his own boots.

"Do what you must to restrain me," Alex said to his daughter. "I want to feel this effect for myself."

Alex pulled the king's boots on. At first he felt no different than before. He was ready to dismiss his hunch when he suddenly felt a tightening of his jaw. His hands clenched into fists and his whole body began to stiffen. He quickly tore the boots off.

"You are sweating," remarked the king.

"I cannot imagine a pair of boots so hideous," Alex responded as he wiped his brow.

"Interesting," remarked Balamor. "Yet you were able to easily remove them?"

Alex shook his head. "I had to exert great will to remove them. It is as if they knew that I understood their threat."

Prince Oscar entered the room and hesitated upon entry. He glanced around the room wondering what great urgency required his immediate presence. Prince Midge sat perched on his shoulder.

"Put these boots on," Alex said as he handed the king's boots to the prince.

Prince Oscar looked confused, but he trusted the people in the room. Without question he sat and removed his boots. He pulled the king's boots on and then stood.

“Am I to take the king’s place now?” he asked humorously. “I do not think that I will fool anyone.”

No one responded to the prince’s quip. Within moments, the prince’s face turned dark and he fidgeted nervously.

“Just what game are we playing here?” he snapped. “I have much to do without wasting time on parlor tricks.”

“Take the boots off then,” Alex said with a smile. “Perhaps your help is not needed.”

Prince Oscar sat down and pulled the boots off. He reached for his own boots, but Alex’s voice stayed his hand.

“Put the king’s boots back on.”

Prince Oscar nodded dutifully and put the king’s boots back on. Alex waited for the darkness to reclaim the prince before speaking.

“Those boots are tainted,” announced Alex. “They are what is causing the king’s irritability. Take them off.”

Prince Oscar’s eyes opened wide in fear. “And you made me put them on?” he scowled. “What treachery is this?”

“Take them off, Oscar,” commanded the king.

The prince made no move to remove the boots. Instead he glared at everyone in the room. King Arik slid down off the desk and walked around the prince. When Oscar turned to follow the king’s progress, Alex grabbed Oscar from behind and lifted him off the ground. King Arik grabbed one boot and Balamor grabbed the other. Together they pulled the boots off of the prince. When Alex released Oscar, the prince shook his head as if just awakening from a dream.

“Why didn’t you remove the boots?” asked Queen Tanya.

“I couldn’t,” frowned Prince Oscar. “What evil are they?”

“A very good question,” remarked Balamor. “Where did they come from?”

“A very popular shoemaker,” answered the prince. “He is relatively new to the city, but he already sells more boots than all of the other shoemakers combined. His prices are inexpensive and his work is outstanding. He also does excellent repairs and he does them quickly. Your boots can be dropped off at night and picked up the following morning. Everyone is going to him now.”

“He must have a lot of helpers to handle such a thriving business,” remarked the king.

“He works alone,” frowned Prince Oscar. “I can’t imagine when he sleeps.”

Alex and Tanya glanced at one another.

“Demonkin never sleep,” hissed Alex.

“I think we may have found the last Claw of Alutar,” agreed the queen. “The question now is what his plan might be.”

“Can the plague also be tied to the boots?” asked the king. “If

they are, why didn't I get sick?"

"I believe the boots are tied to the plague," answered the queen. "Now I understand what is going on in the infirmary. When patients are brought in, we immediately remove their boots when we put them abed. That is why they steadily regain their health, and it is also why I see the same patients over and over again. When we release them from the infirmary, they put their boots back on."

"And the sickness returns." Balamor nodded in agreement. "I suspect that the plague is a secondary effect of the boots. One probably has to wear them for some time before developing the sickness. How long did the king wear these boots?"

"Only for a couple of hours," answered King Arik as he glanced at Prince Midge and Alex. "I am thankful that I have friends who care enough about me to risk my wrath."

"I am willing to wager that the demonkin seeks to have the king address the citizens," stated Alex. "That would explain the queasy feeling in my stomach every time the king speaks about going out in public."

"He could strike down the king without exposing himself," nodded Tanya. "That would allow him to still strike at the rest of us."

"I concur," stated Alex. "At least we now understand the nature of the threat. There is still time to issue new boots to the soldiers of the army and get them on the road towards Miram. The Rangers and the Red Swords desperately need their help."

"No, Alex," Prince Oscar said softly, a queer expression on his face. "That is exactly what we must not do. The boots must be replaced without causing a public disturbance. If the men find out that the boots are tainted, they will not be able to remove them. Worse, we will alert the demonkin that we are on to him."

"You propose to do nothing?" balked Alex. "If it is the demonkin you are worried about, I will go to his shop and slay him."

"You cannot, my friend," replied the prince.

"But I can," Alex said stubbornly. "My sword was blessed by the Mage. It is quite capable of killing a demonkin, Claw of Alutar or otherwise."

"That may be so," retorted Prince Oscar, "but you are one of the Mage's heroes. You are on the demonkin's list. He will kill you on sight, and your sword will never reach its objective. Let's not rush into anything here. This is a game that must be played carefully. It is a challenge of deceit and cunning, and that is something that comes naturally to me."

Chapter 28

Traps

Colonel Rotti opened his eyes and stared up at the canvas roof above him. It took him a moment to get his bearings, but the unicorn flight from the previous night had been an unforgettable experience. He pulled his boots on and rose to his feet. Out of habit, he grabbed his sword sheath and pulled it on before exiting the tent. The sun was just rising above the horizon, and the colonel wiped the sleep from his eyes. It had been dark when they had arrived, and his first sight of the enemy camp caused his eyes to widen in curiosity. The Lanoirian camp was far larger than the one by the Chi River. In fact, it was almost as large as a Federation camp, but that was not what intrigued the colonel. Massive vats sat at the edge of the camp at varying heights above the ground. A series of bamboo pipes connected the vats to one another, and the pipe out of the lowest and largest vat disappeared over the edge of the cliff. Standing alongside that vat were General Somma, Bin-lu, and Rut-ki. The colonel strode towards them to find out what was going to happen.

Bin-lu smiled and turned towards the colonel when he saw him approaching. “Good morning, Colonel Rotti.”

The Federation colonel’s eyebrows rose at the friendly greeting, but he smiled and nodded in return. “We meet again, Bin-lu, although this time you are not a young fisherman with your blushing bride. I understand that you are a Knight of Alcea.”

“Rut-ki truly is my bride,” smiled Bin-lu, “and she is also a Knight of Alcea. As for being a poor fisherman from the city of Barouk, the story is true, although I always thought that I was ill-suited to fishing. Are you trying to point out the disingenuousness of our last meeting, Colonel?”

The emphasis of Bin-lu’s words were centered on the rank of the Federation officer, and Rotti actually blushed with embarrassment. He and Colonel Kerk had portrayed themselves as Cordonians on their spying mission the previous fall.

“Fair point, Bin-lu,” conceded the colonel. “What are all of these vats for?”

“I will let General Somma explain it to you,” Bin-lu replied. “I need to check on the progress of Team Elmor.”

Colonel Rotti watched as the young Lanoirian leaped onto the back of beautiful unicorn which immediately took to the air. He shook

his head in wonder as he watched the magnificent creature fly away. He chuckled inwardly at the stark contrast between Bin-lu and the unicorn and the young fisherman and the nag of a horse he had met in the fall.

"It is odd to hear Bin-lu speak so casually about checking on Team Elmor," commented General Somma. "We Zarans thought we were being so clever with our secrecy, but you Alceans knew about this invasion even before the Federation generals did. Someday I would like to hear the whole story about how this all came to pass."

"May our futures allow that to happen," Rut-ki said softly. "If you will excuse me, I have some tasks that require my attention. I will return when I can."

Rut-ki walked away, leaving the two Federation officers alone on the edge of the cliff. Colonel Rotti walked right up to the edge and peered at the road far below. It was a thin ribbon of hard-packed clay wedged between the sea and the bottom of the cliff, and it extended northwest as far as the eye could see.

"Impressive, isn't it?" asked the general. "The Lanoirians call this place Hun-lo Heights, and it is where Generals Ruppert and Hanold will be met by their betters."

"Their betters?" echoed the colonel. "What do you mean? What is going to happen?"

"The vats contain highly-flammable oil," explained General Somma. "The pipe will carry that oil down to the road and spread it out upon its surface. Once ignited, the entire road will become a blazing inferno."

"An inferno?" gasped the colonel. "I thought these Alceans were trying to save the lives of the Federation soldiers, not roast them. I will not be a party to such a massacre."

General Somma frowned at his subordinate. "You still have not learned to trust these people, Rotti. Everything they say and do is in earnest. That is very much unlike anything we Zarans are used to, but I expected more from you. If you were an Alcean colonel, and the Federation had captured you, what condition would you be in right now?"

"Dead," Colonel Rotti answered without hesitation. "Or held captive awaiting torture," he added after a moment of thought. "I understand that I am lucky to be alive, General, but I would rather be dead than to watch a senseless slaughter. I thought we were here to aid in a surrender."

"We are, Rotti," the general said soothingly. "We are. Look at the waterline alongside the road. If you look closely you will see that a shelf runs alongside the road. According to Bin-lu, the road used to be twice as wide, but the outer half sunk over time. The soldiers will be

able to flee the flames by jumping into the sea, but they will have nowhere to go. It is shallow enough that the men will not drown, but it is also narrow enough that they will have no room to maneuver. Lanoirian soldiers will block both ends of the road, and they will be demanding a surrender. It will be up to Generals Ruppert and Hanold to decide the fate of their men, and that is where you and I come in. Our task is to get them to choose life over death."

"There will be twenty-thousand men on that road," frowned the colonel. "Can't they just wait until the flames die out?"

General Somma shook his head. "The vats are large enough to keep the oil flowing for days, but the Alceans will not let that much time go by before attacking on their own."

"So there is a time limit to their benevolence?" scowled the colonel.

General Somma sighed deeply and shook his head. "I do not know how you can be so stubborn in the face of so much evidence. The Alceans are doing everything they can to save OUR people, and you continue to find faults with their methods. They are risking the lives of their own people by even giving Ruppert and Hanold a single day to decide. I would not be so generous if I were in their position."

Colonel Rotti frowned in confusion.

"This is day nine of the invasion," General Somma continued as if explaining something to a child. "That means that Ongchi is another four days march from here, and that is where this Lanoirian army must go next. Have you forgotten that Generals Kolling and Gertz are closing in on Ongchi from the east? The Alceans have not forgotten. The Lanoirians do not have the massive armies that we Zarans have. These soldiers around you will be the very same men pitted against Team Barouk."

The colonel gasped in understanding. He was so used to dozens of Federation armies that he had forgotten that the Alceans had few troops. The sense of urgency suddenly became all too clear.

"Is there no trap set for Team Barouk?"

"Only delaying tactics," answered General Somma. "They hope to slow Kolling's armies down enough to give time for the Lanoirian soldiers to gather. The five-thousand men that met us along the Chi River will be the first to arrive. Their task will be to buy time for the men here to get to Ongchi. It is a risky proposition at best."

"So the Federation might win after all?" asked Rotti.

"The two forces will be evenly matched," answered the general, "at least in terms of numbers. I have not seen the Lanoirians fight yet, so I can not gauge their worthiness on the battlefield, but I know Kolling to be a shrewd strategist and a bulldog when it comes to giving up ground. I truly do not know how it will turn out, but I will

do what I can to minimize the bloodshed. I would like to think that you would join me in that endeavor."

"I will," vowed Colonel Rotti. "I am sorry for the way I have acted, but I have had a hard time understanding these Alceans. I kept looking for the real reasons for their actions, not realizing that I was already seeing the truth. Tell me how I can help."

General Somma smiled fatherly. "General Ruppert's army should be in the vanguard. I will place myself at Bin-lu's service and try to negotiate the surrender of the 13th Corps. It would be helpful if you joined Rut-ki at the other end of the column. She will be trying to get General Hanold to surrender the 26th Corps. Hanold is a reasonable man, but I do not think he will surrender unless Ruppert does. Treat him with respect. Do not push him unless Rut-ki decides that the time has come to do so."

* * * *

Prince Oscar entered the library and closed the door. King Arik, Alex, Balamor, General Gregor, and Prince Midge all turned to see who was entering the room, but they quickly returned to their discussion of the trap being set for Artimor, the last Claw of Alutar.

"Stop talking," Prince Oscar said loudly. "I do not want to hear your plans yet."

"Why not?" asked Alex. "This is your plan that we are discussing."

"I understand," replied the prince, "but I do not want to know any details just yet. I just need a minute to speak with General Gregor before I leave."

"Before you leave?" asked King Arik. "Where are you going?"

"To buy a new pair of boots," smiled Prince Oscar.

"Is that wise?" asked Alex. "Remember that Artimor is a demonkin of great power. We have no idea what he can do."

"But we do have some idea of some of his capabilities," retorted the prince. "K'san was able to see through the eyes of Red Swords and hear through their ears, and K'san was inferior to a Claw of Alutar. I highly suspect that Artimor is doing exactly the same, but on a much grander scale. That is why I needed to talk to General Gregor. I want him to speak to several soldiers about the king's visit to the estate, and I want him to warn those soldiers that the information is very secret. They are not to talk to anyone about it. Do not discuss our preparations at all. Only the people in this room are to know, with the additions of Jenneva, Tanya, and Theos."

"You think Artimor will learn the secrets?" asked Balamor.

"I do." The prince nodded. "I expect that he has dozens of unwitting moles inside the Royal Palace."

"Then why is there a need for you to visit the shop?" asked the

king. “I do not like the idea of you putting yourself in danger needlessly.”

“There is a need,” answered the prince. “I think Artimor may have far more spies than he can juggle. If he does not expect anything extraordinary to happen, he will not go looking for the secrets we wish for him to discover. My visit should be enough to spur him to look deeper into what is going on in the palace. I am a high profile noble, and he will no doubt sift through my thoughts when I enter his shop.”

“He will learn that we are planning a trap?” frowned Prince Midge. “Was your mother an ogre?”

Alex coughed loudly, and the fairy prince gazed at him to see the Knight of Alcea shaking his head in warning. Prince Midge noticed that the king was not laughing at his joke and suddenly realized that he was besmirching the Bringer’s grandmother. He blushed bright green. Before the embarrassment could become the topic of conversation, Prince Oscar responded.

“I do not think he will learn about the trap. I intend to concentrate on the king’s unannounced retreat to a private estate and nothing more. That is why I do not want to hear your thoughts and plans until later. I also plan to take two soldiers with me as guards. If the demonkin tries to magically delay me to probe further, they will have specific instructions to drag me out of the shop after a certain amount of time has expired. Artimor will not tip his hand by attacking me. I am not one of the big fish he is hoping to net.”

“Be careful, Oscar,” Alex said with concern. “Artimor is not like dealing with a bandit. Tread softly.”

Prince Oscar nodded and exited the library. He left the Royal Palace, but halted in the courtyard where a number of soldiers stood ready to defend the palace. The soldiers straightened in the presence of the prince. Oscar strode in front of the soldiers, examining their boots. When he found two soldiers whose boots were in need of repair, he ordered them to accompany him. He said nothing to them about his destination until they had left the grounds of the palace.

“I have one stop to make,” Prince Oscar announced to this newly formed escort. “Listen to my words carefully and ask no questions. I am going to enter a shop and make a purchase. If I am not out within three minutes, you are to enter the shop and get me out, even if you have to do so forcibly. You will say nothing to me or anyone else until we all return to the palace. Do you understand?”

One of the soldiers opened his mouth to ask for clarification of the strange orders, but he suddenly thought better of it. Prince Oscar was well known within the palace for being exact with his orders. The soldier nodded his understanding. The shoemaker’s shop was fairly

close to the Royal Palace and within minutes they reached the entrance to the shop. The two soldiers immediately took up posts on each side of the doorway and the prince entered the shop. A tiny bell rang as Oscar closed the door. An old man with thick, white hair hobbled through a curtain and entered the room. The shopkeeper looked at the prince with a puzzled expression.

"May I help you?" asked Artimor.

"You may," Prince Oscar smiled warmly. "You are the shoemaker who made the boots for the king?"

"Were they not to his liking?" asked the demonkin.

"Quite the contrary," replied the prince. "He wears them every day. I must agree with him that the workmanship is exquisite. As I am in the market for another pair of boots myself, I thought that you should be the one to provide them."

"Ah," nodded the shoemaker, a hint of skepticism in his voice. "You are Prince Oscar, are you not?"

"I am."

"And you want me to make you something similar to what I gave to the king?"

"Not at all," replied Prince Oscar. "I merely need a pair of simple boots to use during inclement weather. They need not be anything special, but I thought I would buy them from you to show the king's appreciation of your gift."

Prince Oscar felt a tingling sensation in his mind. Had he not been expecting something to happen, he would never have felt it. He concentrated on his plans to secure the old estate of Duke Everich for the king to convalesce in. The feeling lasted only a minute, and Oscar suppressed a sigh of relief.

"Perhaps something that you have in stock would suffice," the prince continued. "I am rather short on time today."

The shoemaker nodded with a smile and walked to one of the shelves. He took a pair of new boots off the shelf and handed them to the prince.

"These boots are your size," said the shoemaker. "You will not even need to try them on. Trust me. I am an expert on feet." Artimor paused and then lowered his voice, "Some of my customers have been lamenting the fact that the king has not addressed the plague that is running rampant in the city. Is he not well himself?"

Prince Oscar started as if someone had just uncovered a state secret. He glanced around the shop anxiously and then returned his eyes to the shoemaker. He sighed and nodded slightly.

"He is feeling a bit under the weather," the prince replied confidentially, "but it is better not to talk about such things. Besides, I am sure that the citizens do not need the king to tell them about the

sickness plaguing the city. How much are the boots?"

"They are a gift," Artimor smiled.

"No," balked the prince. "You have been more than generous already. I insist on paying. A merchant should not be expected to provide for royalty at the expense of others."

Just then the door opened, and two soldiers entered the shop. Prince Oscar shoved several gold coins into the shoemaker's hand.

"I must leave," the prince said apologetically. "I will stop by again and let you know how well these fit."

The prince and his escort left the shop and walked back to the Royal Palace. Before passing through the gates, the prince made the soldiers swear not to reveal where they went or what his orders had been. Once parted from the escort, Oscar hurried up to the library to join in the planning.

"The deed is done," reported the prince. "Now we can get to the details of this plan."

"Are you sure he knows about the Everich estate?" asked Alex.

"I felt a tingling in my mind," answered the prince. "I am sure that he was probing it. "Why did you pick the Everich estate for the ambush site?"

"It has certain features that we can make use of," smiled Alex, "but mostly because it will contain any damage to an area where there are no innocents. Now we have to plan how to get Arik into the estate without being attacked."

"Keep the king heavily shielded while transporting him," suggested Balamor. "While Artimor can likely blast away the shields, he will be hesitant to do so if he thinks that the shields will be dropped once the king is on the estate. He will want the maximum effect of his spells to do damage, not be dissipated by shields. I think you should have multiple, powerful mages shielding him for the trip. The more the better. Let him sense the power of the shields."

"Wycaramor was strong enough to destroy this library," commented General Gregor, "and Lycindor destroyed two rooms in the palace. If the Mage is correct, and Artimor is the most powerful Claw of Alutar, Duke Everich's estate will not fare well under the demonkin's attack. It will likely be damaged. Are you sure it is wise to have the king inside such a structure? He will be trapped."

"The King will be safe," promised Alex. "We just need to be sure of Aritmor's location at all times."

"The fairies will handle that," chirped Prince Midge. "I have already assigned fairies to keep watch on the demonkin."

"Then we are ready to plan the rest of this," declared Prince Oscar. "Let me explain how I envision this unfolding and then Alex can present the military requirements for the ambush. We will need to

discuss everything quickly, but thoroughly. There will be no room for ambiguity, and we have little time to put everything in motion."

* * * *

Colonel Dukirk sighed anxiously as he rode through the swamp with twenty other riders. He was now five leagues ahead of the main column of Team Danver Shores, and he was not happy with what he was seeing. Instead of the roadway widening and returning to forested land as he had expected, it had continuously narrowed until the murky waters crowded the road on both sides. The road resembled a land bridge through the watery muck, and there was not a decent campsite in view.

As if responding to the colonel's sigh, the squad leader spoke. "It doesn't look good, Colonel. The road stays rather narrow up ahead as far as I can see."

Colonel Dukirk nodded in agreement. "We are already at the distance of a day's march, but I cannot imagine camping here for the night. We will ride on a bit farther."

Less than an hour later, the land widened around the road. The cavalry squad halted to survey the land. It was a grassy meadow, though quite damp underfoot. Colonel Dukirk dismounted as did the other riders. When the colonel stepped off the relatively hard surface of the road, his boots sank just a bit in the muck. He shook his head in disgust and sighed once again.

"It's better than nothing," commented the squad leader.

"Barely," conceded the colonel. "Send one of your men back to General Pryblick to inform him that today's march will be a bit longer than normal. He will want an accurate estimate of the distance so he can pace the infantry appropriately."

The squad leader nodded and summoned one of his men. He quietly instructed the soldier and sent him on his way before returning to the colonel.

"Do you think the ground will dry any under the brunt of the sun?" asked the colonel. "I have no practical experience with swamps."

"Nor do I," admitted the squad leader. "The only sizeable swamp in Zara is on the western side of the Barrier. I have never been there, but I think the men should expect damp ground tonight."

A violent splash caught the attention of the two men, and they both whirled towards the sound. They gaped at the sight of a giant reptile with a cavernous mouth full of long, sharp teeth. The creature must have felt foreign eyes upon it because it closed its mouth and slithered off into the water.

"What was that?" gasped the squad leader.

"I don't know," the colonel said in a whisper, "but it does not give

me a warm feeling about our campsite. That thing looked as if it could swallow a man whole."

"That would be far less painful that what I was envisioning," quaked the squad leader. "Did you see the teeth on that? It could rip the belly out of a horse with one bite."

Colonel Dukirk nodded as he eased towards his horse. "I am going to check further north. Perhaps there is drier ground within a reasonable distance."

The squad leader whistled to get his men's attention as he hurried after the colonel. "We will join you. We are, after all, supposed to be protecting you."

Colonel Dukirk smiled inwardly at the squad leader's devotion to duty. He knew that that the man was fearful of remaining near the giant reptile, and he did not blame him. Such monsters were unheard of. The cavalry squad rode for another hour before halting once again. The road through the swamp had narrowed within minutes of leaving the campsite, and it had not widened again. Now, an hour north of the campsite, the road ended.

"This cannot be," scowled the colonel. "We must have missed a turn somewhere."

"We missed no turns," replied the squad leader. "This road might be fine in drier weather, but I suspect that springtime is not the right time to be here. We are trapped."

"Worse than that," frowned the colonel. "The whole 8th Corps and 12th Corps are trapped. General Pryblick will be furious."

"I could send a rider to get him to turn around right now," offered the squad leader.

Colonel Dukirk glanced up at the sun and shook his head. "It is too late for that. The vanguard is already on the narrowest stretch of road. General Pryblick will not encamp the army there. He will continue on to the wider area for the army to settle in for the night. We have just lost two days out of the five allotted to us to reach Tagaret."

"And then what?" asked the squad leader. "How are we supposed to get to Tagaret?"

"That is something that we will have to get the locals to tell us," answered the colonel. "I suspect that we will return to the main road tomorrow and march south into Danver Shores. General Pryblick will take his wrath out on the local population until they tell him the shortest route to Tagaret. It will not be a pretty sight to behold. He may literally destroy the entire city."

Chapter 29

Fire and Water

General Ruppert rode in the vanguard of Team Elmor as the long column of Federation soldiers stretched out along the road under Hunlo Heights. It was his fifth day in Alcea, and he was troubled by the total lack of natives. During their journey, they had not seen a single Lanoirian, and that struck the general as far too odd for coincidence.

"Something is wrong, Mayne," the general said to the colonel riding alongside him. "I could easily understand not running into some locals when the road passed through fields of grain or forests. The few people in the area might have been off tending to crops or keeping out of the forests for some reason, but this section of the journey is nothing but road. Surely, we should have come across a stray merchant or some travelers heading to a distant city, but we have not. What was this section of road like last fall when you visited here?"

The colonel did not respond, and the general glanced at him. Colonel Mayne was staring at the wall of the cliff as if in a daze. General Ruppert reached out and touched the other officer. The colonel started and turned his face towards the general.

"What intrigues you so about a stone wall?" questioned the general. "You did not even hear me talking to you."

"I apologize, General. I guess I was lost in my thoughts."

"So you were," the general replied with a touch of disappointment in his voice. "You need to remember that we are in hostile territory. Stay alert."

The colonel nodded, his eyes flickering towards the wall again. "What were you saying?"

"I was remarking about the total lack of people in this country. Didn't you say that Lanoir was very populous?"

"It is, General. Lanoir has more people than all of the other Alcean provinces combined."

"Then where are they?" inquired the general. "We have been on this road for five days now, and we have not seen one single person."

"That is strange," agreed the colonel, "but it is springtime. Lanoir is an agricultural country. I suspect the people are all out in the fields."

"All of them?" balked the general. "That is preposterous. Where are the merchants? The everyday travelers? The army patrols? Are

there no messengers or couriers?"

The colonel frowned. "The portals were appropriately placed specifically to avoid people, but I agree. We should have seen at least a few people on the trip." The colonel's eyes flickered to the wall again, and the general noticed.

"What is the distraction that keeps dividing your attention?" demanded the general.

"The pipe," the colonel replied without taking his eyes off of it. "It was not here last fall, and I cannot figure out what it is for. Who would run a pipe along the cliff face league after league? And for what purpose?"

"Perhaps it is for drainage of some kind," the general replied dismissively. "Keep focused on the greater problem. Can you think of any reason for the lack of people on this road?"

Suddenly, hundreds of tiny pops echoed along the road and a clear liquid began leaking out of the bamboo pipe. The general stared at the leaky pipe and then raised his eyes skyward. There was not a cloud in the sky, and his brow creased in confusion. He looked back down at the road and stared at the quickly spreading liquid.

"Do they irrigate the fields on top of these cliffs?" he asked the colonel.

"I do not know," confessed the colonel as he watched the liquid covering the road. "I have never been up there. I suppose it is possible." Colonel Mayne's eyes followed the spreading liquid. They focused on the ocean side of the road where a small berm stopped the liquid from flowing into the sea. He shook his head in confusion. "I do not recall seeing that berm last fall," he remarked. "It seems foolish to have such an obstruction to drainage on a coastal road."

"This is not water flooding the road!" the general said with alarm. "Smell it!"

The colonel sniffed the air. His brow creased with alarm. "Lamp oil? That makes no sense."

"It is not lamp oil," the general replied as he stood up in his stirrups and looked back along the column, "but your guess is close enough." The general turned his head and gazed forward. The road before the column was already flooded and he nodded with understanding. "Head towards the rear!" he ordered the colonel. "Let everyone know that they must be ready to evacuate the road at a moment's notice. If you reach a point where the road is not flooded, turn the column around and move them to safety as quickly as you can. This trap is meant to destroy Team Elmor."

The colonel blinked in confusion. He opened his mouth to ask a question, but the general had already spurred his horse to action. As the general raced forward, he called to the cavalry in the vanguard to

follow him. The colonel turned his horse and raced towards the rear of the column.

As General Ruppert and the cavalry around him raced along the coastal road, their horses kicked up the volatile liquid creating a pungent mist that permeated the uniforms of the soldiers. The general's eyes flicked from the leaking pipe to the road ahead. That was when he saw the solitary figure in the distance. The man sat astride a large horse, and he held a flaming torch high above his head. The general's brow immediately broke out in a cold sweat as he understood what was about to happen.

"Into the sea!" shouted General Ruppert. "Into the sea!"

The general pulled hard on the reins, forcing his mount to the right. It was not a graceful exit from the road, but the general cared little for horsemanship at that point. As his horse leaped for the sea, the general watched the torch hit the road. A wall of flame rose half way up the cliff face and raced towards the soldiers of Team Elmor. It was the last thing he saw before he hit the water. His horse must have landed unevenly because the general found himself propelled out of the saddle and dunked under the water.

* * * *

Colonel Mayne raced towards the rear of the column shouting the general's orders. He had made it almost as far as the center of the column before screams and shouts behind him forced him to turn around and gaze towards the vanguard. His eyes widened in fear as he saw a wall of flame racing towards him. Outlined by the wall of fire in the distance, silhouettes of Federation soldiers could be seen leaping into the sea. Like a rippling wave, the column of men ran towards the small berm and dove into the water. With only seconds before the firestorm hit, Colonel Mayne turned his horse towards the berm and kicked it savagely. The horse refused to cooperate. Instead, it reared up on its hind legs. The colonel jumped off his horse, nearly colliding with the nearby black-cloaks. As he ran to the berm and dove into the water, he was vaguely aware of bowstrings snapping somewhere nearby, but he had no time to worry about such things. His body sliced into the water.

When the colonel surfaced, he was in a sea of bobbing heads. His feet could not touch the bottom, and he thought of abandoning his gear, but as he turned back towards the road, he saw some of the Federation soldiers standing waist deep in water. Beyond them was the burning inferno of the coastal road. The colonel struggled towards the shore, his legs scrapping along a submerged shelf. He crawled up onto the shelf and rose to his feet. The heat of the flames was searing, but the colonel was grateful for a place to stand. Screams of agony rose above the roar of the massive flames, and the colonel turned his

attention to the devastation on the road. Burning corpses of men who had not been quick enough to flee the flames littered the road, as did abandoned horses. As his eyes roved over the carnage, he saw the remains of the black-cloaks. He wondered why they had not issued spells to protect themselves from the fire.

Next to the colonel stood a squad leader. He noticed where the colonel was looking, and he offered his thoughts. “The mages were shot by archers from atop the cliffs,” stated the sergeant. “I guess the Alceans were afraid that the black-cloaks might spoil their little surprise for us.”

Colonel Mayne glanced at the squad leader and nodded an acknowledgment. His eyes then rose towards the top of the cliff. He saw Lanoirian archers lining the cliffs as far as he could see in each direction. He sighed with resignation as he realized the severity of the trap they had walked into.

“I need to inform General Ruppert of our situation,” the colonel said to the squad leader before turning and heading towards the vanguard.

“Watch your step,” warned the squad leader. “The bottom here is slippery enough to toss you back into the sea.”

* * * *

A half dozen captains crowded around General Ruppert waiting for his orders, but the general said nothing. He stood silently waist deep in water staring at the road and the cliffs above. Behind him he heard the shouts and commotion as members of the cavalry tried to save their horses. The horses did not want to be near the flames, and it was nearly impossible to get them up onto the slippery shelf that ran alongside the road. He pushed the sounds out of his mind as he tried to formulate a plan of defense. The general gazed back along the road and shook his head in wonder. He hoped that the colonel had managed to save a lot of men, but he knew that he had not had time to warn all of the men. The fire spread much too rapidly for him to have gotten to the end of the column.

General Ruppert turned his attention to the south. Through the flickering flames, he saw the distant rider who had dropped the torch. The man still sat astride his horse as if waiting for something to happen. The general’s face turned red with rage.

“Get the men ready to fight,” commanded General Ruppert. “We are marching around the fire. Pass the word back.”

The word spread quickly. While he waited for his armies to prepare for battle, General Ruppert tried to think of a way to use his men effectively. He knew that his forces would be bottlenecked on the shelf, but he also thought he had more than enough men to overwhelm the enemy. He just needed a way to use them effectively.

Perhaps he could keep the enemy engaged at the vanguard while General Hanold's Aertan army backed off the shelf to the north. The Aertans would then need to find a way to get atop the cliffs and come up behind whatever forces were ahead of Ruppert. The general was still mulling over the plans in his mind when Colonel Mayne arrived.

"You are going to fight your way out of this?" asked the colonel.

"We are soldiers," frowned the general. "Fighting is what we do. How far back did you mange to get before the firestorm overran you?"

"Almost half way," answered the colonel. "General, are you aware that the cliffs are lined with Lanoirian archers?"

The general gazed at the colonel and then looked up at the tops of the cliffs. He could see no archers, but when he turned to the north, he could see them in the distance. He sighed. He had no doubt that the archers were above him right now. He just couldn't see them.

"We will need the battle mages then," stated the general. "If the Alceans want to play with fire, we will show them that it can burn them just as easily. Send for them."

"The black-cloaks are dead," stated the colonel. "The Lanoirians shot them as the fire engulfed the column. As far as I can tell, those were the only arrows sent down from the cliffs. I think they anticipated your use of magic."

"Curses," snarled the general. "How could the Alceans have known we were coming this way?"

"If you are General Ruppert," said a feminine voice, "you should walk forward and ask Bin-lu. He awaits you at the southern end of the fire."

The general spun around, seeking the woman who had spoken to him, but he could not see her.

"Above you, General," the colonel said, his voice heavy with disbelief.

The general glanced up and saw a tiny blue woman hovering in the air, her wings beating frantically. For several seconds, the general was speechless as he gawked at the fairy.

"No harm will come to you," the woman continued, "and you will be allowed to return to your men if that is what you wish, but you must go alone."

"Tell this Bin-lu to come out here," retorted the general. "I will guarantee his safe return."

"That is not the way this game will be played," countered the fairy. "Your position is not safe, and Bin-lu is no fool. He has no need to endanger himself."

"Then I guess Bin-lu will have to do without any conversation," snapped the general.

"What do you mean when you say that our position is not safe?"

asked Colonel Mayne with alarm. “Is some other calamity coming our way?”

“It is not my place to discuss such things,” answered the fairy before refocusing on the general. “I will report your refusal to parley to Bin-lu. Farewell.”

“Wait!” called the general. “I did not refuse to meet with Bin-lu. We were merely haggling over the location. Tell him that I will think about it.”

“As you wish, General Ruppert,” replied the fairy just before she darted up into the sky.

“What was that creature?” asked one of the nearby captains.

Neither the general nor the colonel responded. The two high officers stared at one another for a moment before the colonel spoke softly.

“I do not think it will hurt to talk to them. If you will allow it, I will go in your stead. You can gauge their intent by how they treat me.”

“They think they are in a strong enough position to demand our surrender,” scowled the general. “There is no other reason for their desire to talk to us, and you are not in a position to fulfill their desires.”

“And you are not inclined to?” asked the colonel.

“Why should I? I have twenty-thousand men at my back. At worst, we can just sit tight and wait for the flames to die down. Then we will crush whatever men Bin-lu has assembled behind him.”

“We do not know the size of his army,” mused the colonel. “That alone might be worth the parley. If he only has the men atop the cliffs, our victory would be assured.”

“That is a valid point,” the general agreed. “Come, we will both go talk to Bin-lu.”

“But she specifically said for you to come alone,” objected the colonel.

“No tiny woman is going to dictate my actions, nor is any Lanoirian. You will accompany me. Send word to General Hanold to remove his men to safety and await my instructions.”

The colonel nodded and grabbed a man to serve as a runner. He gave the soldier the message and directed him to deliver it to General Hanold personally. When that was done, the colonel joined General Ruppert and walked along the shelf to meet with Bin-lu. When they arrived at the end of the fire, Bin-lu stood at the edge of the road. A short ladder had been placed down on the shelf to facilitate the general’s return to the road. The general climbed the ladder, followed by Colonel Mayne.

“I see that you have chosen to bring Colonel Mayne with you,”

Bin-lu said in greeting. “That is acceptable. I am Bin-lu.”

“How do you know my name?” the colonel asked with a puzzled expression.

“You were here last fall,” answered Bin-lu. “Did you really think we would not be paying attention when an enemy scout was sent to reconnoiter his attack route? Come, I have a tent set up just around the bend in the road. We can talk there.”

General Ruppert halted and turned away from Bin-lu. He gazed back along the road to see what the Lanoirian could see from his vantage point and shook his head in despair. Bin-lu had a fairly good view of the Federation vanguard, and he would undoubtedly be able to anticipate any attack before it was launched. The general saw a large pipe climbing the face of the cliff and he gazed upward to see where it led. He could see nothing. He turned and followed the Lanoirian, Colonel Mayne falling in by his side. As they rounded the bend, the scope of the Lanoirian force was revealed. Thousands of Lanoirian soldiers stood ready for battle. The general’s eyebrows rose in surprise, but he said nothing. Bin-lu led the Zarans into the tent and ordered refreshments for the Federation officers. The lone guard left the tent, and Colonel Mayne’s hand moved towards the hilt of his sword.

“I have brought you here to save your lives, Colonel,” Bin-lu said without turning around to face the Zaran. “It would be a shame to kill you for dishonoring my hospitality. Please leave your sword sheathed.”

Bin-lu walked around the small table set in the middle of the tent and sat down. He waved towards the chairs opposite him as an invitation for the Zarans to sit.

“Are you a mage?” asked the colonel.

“I am not,” Bin-lu smiled thinly as he pointed to a shield propped up against the tent wall. “I saw your reflection in the shield.” Turning his gaze to the general, the Knight of Alcea continued, “General, I have managed to put your armies in a position of great danger. I have not destroyed your armies because King Arik would prefer not to kill your men. I am authorized by the king to accept your surrender. In return for your men giving up their weapons peacefully, I promise to have your men cared for until such a time that they can be returned to Zara. Will you accept these terms?”

“You have burned a road,” scowled General Ruppert. “Nothing more. While I give you credit for delaying my march on Ongchi, you have hardly won this battle. Allow me to offer you the same terms. Surrender your forces to me, and I will see that you are well treated.”

“I had heard that you were stubborn,” retorted Bin-lu, “but I also heard that you could be a reasonable man. You are in no position to

haggle. The 13th Corps and 26th Corps will surrender or die. That choice will be made here and now. Let me explain your situation more fully to you."

"Please do," scoffed the general.

"I have seven thousand men massed at each end of your column," declared Bin-lu, "and I have another thousand atop the cliffs. All of them have an ample supple of arrows, and I am sure you will admit, a decidedly superior position on the battlefield. We could cut down thousands of your men before a single one of them got off that shelf in the ocean. Why suffer your men to die when it is all for nothing?"

"That is your point of view," shrugged the general. "The fact is, my men are not in danger at the moment. While they may be standing in a decidedly inferior position, you cannot approach them without giving up your superior position. Your men, Bin-lu, will have to enter the sea to attack me. Are you prepared to do that?"

The general had not expected an answer, and certainly not a frank one, but that is exactly how Bin-lu replied.

"My men will not get their feet wet, General. The men at the ends will not even make a move to attack you directly. I suspect that you think you can just wait the fire out, but you had best think again. There is enough oil in the vats up on the cliff to keep the fire burning for days, but it will not burn that long. While our engineers have taken every precaution to keep the bamboo pipes from burning in the flames, they could not shield them completely. Within hours the bamboo pipes will fail and thousands of gallons of oil will flood onto the road. So many gallons will dump so quickly that the oil will breach the small berm we built to contain it. I do not think I have to tell you what will happen to your men when the burning oil starts spreading over the surface of the sea."

Colonel Mayne gasped. Suddenly the words spoken by the tiny flying woman made sense. "How much time do we have?" he asked.

"I cannot say accurately," answered Bin-lu as he rose to his feet, "but we are wasting precious moments here. I will let the military minds of the Federation discuss this among themselves. Let me know when you have made a decision."

Bin-lu exited the tent leaving the two Federation officers alone. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"We have no choice," Colonel Mayne eventually said. "Everything he said was true. The Alceans have bested us."

"The choice is not yours to make," snapped General Ruppert. "It is mine, and I will not stand in disgrace when General Franz takes control of Ongchi."

"That will never happen," came a voice from the tent flap. "General Franz is dead."

General Ruppert leaped to his feet and whirled around to face the speaker. “Somma?” he scowled. “What are you doing in the enemy’s camp?”

“They bested us too, Ruppert,” answered the Spinoan general. “They built a dam and flooded their own lands just so they could destroy it at the appropriate time and crush our armies. Most of my men would have perished if the Alceans had not saved them. Our people have woefully underestimated these Alceans, Ruppert. They have known for a very long time that this invasion was coming, and they have prepared very carefully.”

General Ruppert sighed and nodded, but his face grew dark as he once again gazed at the Spinoan general. “They must have had someone rather high in the Federation army to have had such advance knowledge. Why is it that you walk around freely among the enemy with your weapon still intact?”

“Think before you accuse me,” scowled General Somma. “I am a Spinoan, not a Baroukan. Do you think Emperor Jaar or Grand General Kyrga would share information with a Spinoan any more than he would an Ertakan? You and I learned about the invasion at the same time, during the festival in Despair. The Alceans knew about it long before then. In fact, Bin-lu actually traveled with the colonels of the 4th Corps and the 18th Corps when they arrived here last fall. They were already well informed at that time.”

“Then explain your freedom,” retorted General Ruppert.

“I am not truly free,” replied General Somma. “I was brought here because I offered to talk to you about surrendering, and before you seize upon that confession and make something out of it that is not true, let me explain. The Alceans believe that evil forces are manipulating Emperor Jaar into attacking Alcea. Those evil forces seek to benefit from the tears of millions. To fight that insidious evil, King Arik has decided to avoid as much bloodshed as he can and still claim victory over the Federation. Wherever it is possible, the Alceans seek surrender rather than battle. They truly do not want to kill all of your men, Ruppert. That is why they built the berm in the first place. Think about it. If they wanted your men dead, why contain the oil to just the roadway?”

General Ruppert frowned and nodded. For all his gruff talk of fighting on, he had to admit that the Alceans had trapped him quite well.

“How did they treat your men?” General Ruppert asked.

“Cordially,” answered General Somma. “They loaded them into wagons and took them away to camps. They did split up squads to lessen the threat of escape, but my men were treated well. They have healers at the camps and they promised that my men would be well

fed and returned to Zara when the war was over."

"Do you believe them?" asked General Ruppert.

"I do," answered General Somma. "The Alceans that I have met so far have been amazingly honest with me. They have a sense of trust and honesty that does not exist in our lands."

"That is all well and good," interjected Colonel Mayne, "but that supposes that the Alceans will win this war. I cannot believe that such a feat is possible."

"Then you have much to learn, Colonel," replied General Somma. "Our forces in Cordonia are out of the war already. In Sordoa, Gattas and Montero were completely destroyed. Counting the 13th Corps and 26th Corps, half of our armies are already removed from the playing field, and there are still four days to go before our attack is supposed to start."

"What about Kolling and Gertz?" asked General Ruppert.

"The Alceans have not spoken about them much," replied the Spinoan general. "They have said that Team Barouk has no horses, food, or battle mages, but they have not revealed any traps set for them. I am sure that Bin-lu will discuss what he can with you, General, but time is wasting for your men. Until you surrender, the Alceans will not halt the flow of oil, and that berm needs only a small break in it to destroy your entire army. I urge you to act quickly to save your men."

"Are you positive that I cannot keep my army together if we just stay on the shelf until the fire dies?" asked General Ruppert.

General Somma shook his head and sighed. "Step outside the tent, Colonel and cast your gaze offshore. Come back in and tell the general what you see."

Colonel Mayne rose and moved quickly to the tent flap. He stepped outside and returned immediately. "Hundreds of ships are converging on us. Maybe thousands. It is hard to tell. The horizon is thick with masts."

"Ships?" questioned General Ruppert.

"The ships are to take your men to the camps," explained General Somma, "but they could also be used to attack your men on the shelf, and you would have little defense against them. Your men would be caught between their catapults and the burning road. You really have no choice, Ruppert. This battle will be over today no matter what you choose. I explained the reason for your haste, but not the reason for Bin-lu's haste. The armies he has massed against you are needed to fight Kolling and Gertz, and they are days away from Ongchi. The Alceans cannot afford to offer you more time to dwell upon your position. While they want to take your men alive, they do intend to win this war. They will destroy your armies if they must. Surrender

now, and let your men live to return home to their families."

General Ruppert nodded in agreement and rose to his feet. "Take me to Bin-lu so I can get my men onto dry land."

Chapter 30

Royal Death

The mood in the library of the Royal Palace in Tagaret was somber. King Arik and Alexander Tork checked their weapons while Jenneva, Tanya, Theos, and Balamor spoke softly in the corner. Prince Oscar and General Gregor stood by the fireplace. Prince Midge was perched upon the mantle above the fireplace watching everyone in the room when another male fairy flew in from the balcony and landed next to the fairy prince. Nixy spoke so softly that Prince Oscar could not hear his report even though he stood only a pace away. Suddenly, Prince Midge started stomping his feet, his face turning bright green. Nixy tried to shy away from his prince, but Prince Midge advanced one step for each step backwards Nixy took. Everyone turned to watch the commotion just in time to see Nixy fall off the mantle. The tiny green man frantically flapped his wings as he hurtled towards the floor. Just before he struck the floor, Nixy managed to get his bearings. He shot upward, but he did not try to land on the mantle again. He hovered before it as Prince Midge stood with a stern expression on his face. The fairy prince had his hands firmly on his hips and he glowered at the other fairy. Prince Midge suddenly straightened one arm towards the balcony doors.

"Go!" snarled the fairy prince.

Nixy did not need to hear the order a second time. He darted away so fast that Prince Oscar felt the wind of his passing. The king's father turned and looked at the fairy prince questioningly.

"What is wrong?" he asked.

"Artimor is on the move," declared Prince Midge. "Three soldiers from the palace have visited his shop in the last hour. After the third soldier had left, the demonkin closed his shop and slipped out the rear entrance."

"So the demonkin is on his way to assassinate the king?" asked Theos.

"It sure sounds that way," stated Queen Tanya. "He is a cautious one to verify the information three times. Do you think he suspects a trap?"

"What else?" Prince Oscar asked, staring sternly at the fairy prince. "I have never seen you berate one of your people that way. What are you not telling us?"

Prince Midge spoke so softly that no one could hear him.

“Louder,” demanded Prince Oscar. “This is no time for secrets.”

“My people have lost the demonkin,” scowled Prince Midge. “I cannot believe that they failed me when the Bringer’s life is in danger. I have sent Nixy to gather every fairy in the city. We will find Artimor again.”

“No,” Alex said quickly and firmly. “Call them back.”

“Call them back?” balked the fairy prince. “I will not. I would never allow my people to be the cause of the Bringer’s death. We will find the demonkin if it the last thing the fairy people do.”

“Call them back,” Alex replied strongly. “They can only worsen the situation now.”

“You are not the Bringer, Alexander Tork,” the fairy prince said defiantly. “I do not need to obey you.”

Alex turned to King Arik. “Give Midge the order,” he pleaded. “The fairies will never find the demonkin, but they will alert him to the fact that we are looking for him.”

“Alex is right,” interjected Queen Tanya. “Think about all of the other times that the fairy people have lost track of someone. In each case it was a demonkin. They must have some mechanism for hiding themselves that the fairies cannot penetrate. Call them back.”

King Arik nodded and looked at the fairy prince. “Do it, Prince Midge. Losing Artimor was not the fault of your people. Bring your fairies home.”

Prince Midge nodded and darted through the balcony doors. As soon as he was gone, the king turned to the queen.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked.

“The fairies have only lost three people that I know of,” answered the queen. “They lost an old man coming through the Door in Mya and they lost a woman in Danver Shores. Artimor is the third person they have lost.”

“Wycaramor and Cavanor.” Alex nodded. “It is no coincidence.”

“Does this mean that Artimor knows that we have set a trap for him?” asked the king. “I would think that is the case if he intentionally shielded himself against the fairy that was watching him.”

“Not necessarily,” offered Balamor. “They may merely have some kind of cloaking magic that they employ when they need secrecy the most. Unless we have some proof that the demonkin actually detected the fairy, we cannot be sure of what he knows.”

“Great,” General Gregor remarked bitterly. “So we just send the king and queen into a trap without knowing how much Artimor knows or where he is? Am I the only one who does not care much for this plan any more?”

“The trap cannot be rescheduled,” replied Prince Oscar. “We have

gone to a lot of trouble to set it up. Artimor would not fall for it a second time. We either do it now, or we abandon the idea."

"Then abandon it," shrugged General Gregor. "The demonkin is at his shop every day. It is not as if he is hard to find. We will kill him there."

"There are two problems with that," replied Alex. "There is no guarantee that Artimor will ever return to his shop now. The only place we can be sure of finding him now is at the Everich estate. The other problem is his power. There is no way we can gauge his power without testing him, and once we test him, we best be prepared to end his life on the spot. The Everich estate was chosen because of its location. It is one of the largest pieces of private land in the city."

"Alex is right," agreed Jenneva. "We have talked about this before. Even if we managed to save King Arik from the demonkin's attack elsewhere in the city, hundreds of people might die."

"And we cannot evacuate a large portion of the city without tipping our hand," added King Arik. "No, the Everich estate is the best place in the city for a battle, and it has to happen tonight. What alterations do we need to make to our plans to account for Artimor's disappearance?"

"Do you mean other than the fact that we will not be able to see the demonkin?" quipped Theos. "I think our plan may be riskier than anything we had imagined. How will we even know where he is?"

"He will be revealed when he strikes," retorted Jenneva.

"Great," Prince Oscar replied sarcastically. "So all we have to do is let him assassinate the king, and we will have found him."

* * * *

The Claw of Alutar stood under a tree across the street from the estate of the late Duke Everich, his form wrapped in a cloak of invisibility. The street was in an area of large estates, and it had little traffic on it. An occasional carriage would amble by heading for a private driveway, but mostly the street remained unused as its only purpose was to serve the estates of the city's most wealthy citizens. Artimor stood patiently, unmoving and unseen.

As the sun began to set over Tagaret, a rickety old two-wheeled wagon rolled along the street. Artimor watched it closely. The ancient black wagon was narrow, its seat only wide enough for two, and behind the seat was a simple flat bed with low sideboards. An open coffin rested on the flatbed, its lid placed alongside the box. The driver's seat held a single person, an old hunched man dressed completely in black with a towering hat atop his head. The horse that pulled the wagon was almost as ancient as the wagon itself. Its footsteps were tired and slow as if it had pulled the wagon for so long that it no longer cared if it reached its destination or not. The wagon

passed by the entrance to the Everich estate. Artimor dismissed the mortician and his wagon, and he turned his eyes towards the far end of the street, hoping that his information would prove correct. He had heard that a sick King Arik was being taken to a private estate so that the city would not learn of his illness.

The sound of a creaking gate drew Artimor's attention once more to the mortician's wagon. He turned and saw the hunched over old man swinging open the gate of a nearby estate. The mortician hobbled back onto his seat, and the wagon rolled through the open gate and onto the private drive beyond it.

Just as the last rays of sunlight were fleeing from Tagaret, Artimor saw something promising. At the far end of the street, a plain carriage appeared. The carriage carried no markings of wealth or privilege, but two mounted soldiers preceded it. Another two mounted soldiers followed behind, and two soldiers sat upon the driver's seat. While it was not unheard of for soldiers to escort a wealthy citizen or councilor, it was an auspicious sign for the demonkin's intent. As it drew nearer, he saw two red-headed men on the rear step of the carriage, probably the red-headed mages that he had heard about. Another good sign, but not proof that the king was inside the carriage. The Claw of Alutar waited.

The two lead riders suddenly distanced themselves from the carriage, halting at the gates to the Everich estate. One of the riders dismounted and swung the gates open. It was another good sign, but Artimor was not about to be trapped by a false report. He had to make sure that the king was in the carriage. As the carriage turned into the private drive, the demonkin tried to peer into the windows, but they were blacked out, leaving no opportunity to see the king. He glanced at the mages on the rear step of the carriage and tried to anticipate the reach of their shields, but he knew that was a fruitless exercise. They would undoubtedly concentrate on the carriage itself as had Fredrik before them. Artimor was not about to make the same foolish mistake that Cavanor had made. He was not content just to kill the mages protecting the king. Still, their concentration on the carriage itself could prove to have been a mistake. Artimor smiled inwardly, realizing that the mounted soldiers were left unprotected.

As the carriage passed through the gates, Artimor magically reached out and touched the mind of one of the trailing soldiers. It took a moment to seize the information he needed, but the soldier's mind verified the contents of the carriage. Both King Arik and Queen Tanya were inside. The last Claw of Alutar smiled broadly. He thought for a brief moment of attacking the carriage immediately, but he restrained himself. He had no doubt that both of the red-headed mages were using their full powers to protect the king, and the queen

was probably doing the same inside the carriage. If the three mages were powerful enough, they might succeed in blunting the force of Artimor's attack, and that was unacceptable. There was no need to rush. Once the king was safely inside the mansion, the mages would relax their shields, and that is when they all would die.

The rear riders halted at the gates and closed them. They then hurried after the carriage to be present when the king and queen exited the carriage and entered the mansion. Artimor watched closely. He saw the carriage stop at the front of the mansion. The two red-headed mages got down from the rear step, but their actions clearly showed that they were still protecting the king. King Arik and Queen Tanya stepped out of the carriage, and the king glanced around before they walked up the steps and through the front door of the mansion. The mages hurried after them. The carriage was quickly moved away from the front of the mansion as were the horses of the riders. The six soldiers entered the mansion, leaving no sign that the building was even occupied. It was the perfect hiding place for the sick king. For Artimor, it was also the perfect tomb for the king. The demonkin moved away from the tree to position himself for the strike.

Just as Artimor headed for the street, a nearby noise distracted him. He turned and frowned as the mortician drove his wagon through the creaky gates and onto the street. Seated next to the mortician was an obvious widow. The woman was dressed entirely in black, and a dark veil covered her face. Although he was invisible, Artimor reflexively stepped back to let the wagon pass. As the mortician's wagon passed in front of the gates of the Everich estate, one of the wheels broke free causing the wagon to tilt to one side and screech to a halt, the coffin banging loudly against the low sideboards. The mortician and the widow nearly tumbled off the seat, but the old man managed to save them from the fall, his feet landing squarely on the street with the widow pressed tightly to his back.

The old man turned slowly, taking hold of the widow and gently lowering her to the ground. Without a word, the mortician walked away from the wagon towards the wayward wheel. He bent over, seemingly with great effort, and picked up one edge of the wheel. He rolled the wheel back to the wagon and leaned it against the side before stooping to inspect the axle.

Artimor cursed his bad luck. He was tempted to blow the fools away, but he controlled himself. Any attack on the mortician would ruin his chances of killing King Arik. Seeing that the mortician's wagon was not going anywhere for some time, the demonkin walked into the street and around the wagon. He walked right up to the gates of the Everich estate and peered at the mansion. As the sky grew dark with the coming night, the demonkin raised his arms and clasped his

hands together. Extending his fists through the metal gates, he let loose a spell of great power. The air shimmered along the drive as the powerful projectile raced towards the mansion. A second later, the Everich mansion exploded in a massive flurry of stone and wood. In the blink of an eye, the Everich mansion ceased to exist. Debris shot upward and outward, leaving not a single wall standing. Artimor grinned as he watched the debris begin to fall back to the ground. So much for King Arik and Queen Tanya, he thought to himself.

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The mortician mumbled unintelligibly as he examined the axle and the undercarriage of the wagon. The widow standing nearby him gently touched his shoulder and nodded towards the Everich estate. The mortician turned to see the air shimmering along the private drive. While the explosion was shaking the whole neighborhood, the mortician reached under the wagon and pulled a long two-handed sword from its concealed position. He whirled towards the gates of the Everich estate, his tall hat falling from his head to reveal a long blond braid that had been curled up inside the hat. With the mortician disguise no longer needed, Alexander Tork raced across the street.

“Right at the gates,” the widow said urgently. “He will reveal himself by the time you get there.”

Artimor heard the noises behind him. He whirled around to see Alex racing towards him, a long sword extended before him. The demonkin sneered as he cast a spell at the Knight of Alcea, but the magical projectile dissipated upon impact with a shield protecting Alex. Artimor glanced at the widow with disgust. He knew that it must be Jenneva opposing him. He should have been concerned by their absence from the king’s party, but he was too enthralled with the chance to kill King Arik. Just as well, he thought. It was time for the other two heroes of the Mage to meet their deaths. He brought up both hands, pointing one towards Jenneva and one towards Alex. Twin streams of electrifying force stretched out towards his victims.

“Protect yourself!” Alex shouted as he dove for the ground, turning his sword sideways and pulling it close to his body.

Jenneva dropped the shield around Alex and quickly reinforced her own. Her actions came not a moment too soon. The force of Artimor’s spell hammered her shields with a power she had never felt before. Closing her eyes tightly, Jenneva forced all of her power into her shields. She knew that if she did not, she would die.

Alex rolled towards the demonkin and jumped out of his roll near where the twin streams of electrifying power were emanating from. He swiftly slashed out with his magical sword, feeling the satisfying strike of the sword against something tangible. The twin streams instantly vanished, and the form of Artimor appeared. Alex did not

take time to examine the demonkin's wound. He brought his sword back in another swing, directing the blade towards Artimor's neck. The blessed sword sliced through the demonkin's neck, sending Artimor's head falling to the ground, and his body sliding down the gates of the Everich estate.

* * * *

The empty wagon halted at the gates to the Royal Palace in Farmin. One of the guards moved towards the wagon, but the captain of the mounted troops escorting the wagon intercepted him before he reached the driver.

"We have come for supplies," stated the captain. "Open the gates."

"Supplies?" scoffed the guard as he noted the patch on the captain's uniform. "I think not. The 15th Corps has been deployed to Alcea. Deserters are certainly not allowed entry into the Royal Palace."

One of the other guards blew a whistle upon hearing his comrade's words. Two squads of soldiers raced towards the gates, but the captain and his men did not flinch. The captain dismounted and waited. The gates of the palace opened slightly and soldiers flowed out to surround the wagon and the squad escorting it. A gruff sergeant approached the captain standing before the guards.

"What is going on here?" he asked.

"Your guard needs better training," spat the captain. "He should be aware that the 15th Corps has a special company that did not deploy to Alcea. I am Captain Ergard, and I have come for supplies."

"Ergard, eh?" the sergeant replied. "I've heard of you. You are the boys holding Prince Harold captive."

"We are safeguarding the prince," corrected the captain.

"Whatever," scowled the sergeant. "Why are you coming here for supplies? There is a depot for that."

"The depot does not store the delicacies that Prince Harold demands," retorted Captain Ergard as he waved a paper in front of the sergeant's face. "I have authorization from the Crown Prince. Are you about to refuse his orders?"

The sergeant took the paper and looked at it. With a shake of his head, he handed the paper back to the captain and waved his men back inside the gates.

"Let them through," the sergeant instructed the guards.

Captain Ergard mounted his horse as the guards swung the gates wide open. As the reserve squads returned to their patrols, Captain Ergard led his men through the gates and around to the side of the palace where the kitchen entrance was located. The captain proceeded down the steps to the underground entrance to the kitchens while his

men dismounted and secured their horses. He banged loudly on the door, and it opened quickly. A soldier asked his business, and the captain once again showed the authorization from General Montero. The soldier nodded and handed the paper back to the captain. The captain stepped into the kitchens and looked around. When the soldier moved to close the door, the captain reached out and restrained him.

"I wouldn't bother closing it," the captain smiled. "We have a large list to fill, and my men will be coming and going so frequently that it makes no sense to close it. It would only slow us down. Unless you plan to help with the loading, you can take a break for a while. We will make sure that no one sneaks in while we load the wagon."

The soldier laughed and nodded. "It's not like anyone ever tries to sneak in through the kitchens anyways. I will be in a room just down the hall. Wake me when you are ready to leave."

The captain nodded and slapped the soldier on the back. As soon as the soldier was gone, the captain signaled his men. His men gathered near the rear of the wagon to shield an additional soldier who had been hidden inside the wagon. The hidden soldier wore the patch of the 16th Corps of Spino, and he carried a gaily wrapped box with a big bow. The infiltrator moved with the soldiers of the 15th Corps as they moved down the stairs and into the kitchens. While the soldiers were entering the kitchens, the captain moved through the rooms until he found a young serving girl. He smiled at her as he pulled her aside.

"We've run into a soldier from Spino," he whispered to her. "He is carrying a special gift for Prince Lyker from Princess Anadale, and he is trying to deliver it secretly. Do you know a way to reach the prince's quarters without being detected?"

"There are servant ways," frowned the young girl, "but only servants are allowed in them. He should speak to the guards at the front entrance of the palace."

"That would sort of spoil the surprise now, wouldn't it?" smiled the captain.

"The prince would still be surprised," the girl answered, clearly confused by the captain's words.

"While the gift is for the prince, the need for secrecy is to keep the king from finding out about Prince Lyker's romance with Princess Anadale. He would be furious if he knew about it, but they plan to wed."

"Oh!" brightened the young girl. "How sweet. Can they do that without the king's blessing?"

"They feel confident that King Harowin will agree once he is properly prepared," answered the captain, "but they don't dare broach the subject while the king's mind is on the Alcean War. Can you escort

the Spinoan to the prince's chambers?"

"The prince is not in his chambers," replied the serving girl. "He is with Prince Lindmyr and the son of one of the nobles. I just took some ale up to the three of them. If you wish, I could deliver the gift to him. I will keep it secret."

The captain's smile widened. The difficulty of the mission had just lessened a great deal. "Take the Spinoan to the princes," urged the captain. "He will see that you are amply rewarded for your service to the heir of Spino."

The infiltrator walked into the room and stood beside the captain. The young serving girl looked at him and the precious gift he held in his hands. She smiled and nodded. The captain whispered in the ear of the Spinoan soldier and then departed.

The girl led the Spinoan soldier through the underground corridors and opened a door in the corridor. She led him up a narrow stairway that was unlit, warning him of all the sudden turns and chattering on about her life in the palace. The Spinoan soldier paid no attention. His mind was elsewhere.

Eventually the serving girl opened a door unseen by the soldier. The light flooding into the stairwell seemed brilliant, but it was not. They stepped into a dimly lit corridor and the young girl moved to a door across the hallway. She knocked on the door and someone called back, but the words were unintelligible. The young girl merely smiled. She seemed to know what was expected of her, even if she hadn't been able to decipher the actual words. A moment later, the door opened a crack and someone looked out at the young girl. He mumbled a question and the girl turned to point to the Spinoan soldier who had not been noticed up to that point. The soldier pushed the young girl into the room and leaped over her, dropping the gaily wrapped package and drawing his sword.

The three young men in the room leaped away from the door, but the soldier was prepared for just such a reaction. He raced across the room, his sword swinging in a wide sweep as he pivoted sharply. He sliced open the belly of the younger prince and hacked into the arm of the visitor with the same swing. The young girl started screaming, but the soldier paid no attention to her. He had little time to get away, and he could not afford to be distracted. The elder prince made a break for the door, but he was not quick enough. The soldier raced after him and shoved the sword into his back. The blade passed through the prince's body, taking his life force with it. The girl was still screaming, and it suddenly annoyed the soldier. He pulled the sword out of the prince's body and stabbed the girl in the throat. The screaming stopped. As silence reclaimed the room, the soldier turned and surveyed his handiwork, making sure that his Spinoan patch was

visible to the visitor. Satisfied that both princes were dead, the soldier left the room and headed for the servants' way just as distant voices shouted in alarm.

Chapter 31

Swamp Creatures

King Harowin of Ertak was outraged. He shouted at anyone who came within the sound of his voice, and he struck anyone foolish enough to come within his reach. When General Harford entered the room, he stood in the doorway and surveyed the devastation. Chairs were overturned and banners were ripped from the walls. Shards of pottery littered the floor and wall paintings were slashed. The king stood near his throne, a long sword in his hand. The general wanted to sneak out of the room before he was seen, but it was already too late. The king had seen him.

"What have you discovered, Harford?" shouted the king. "Has the culprit been caught? Where is he?"

The general glanced around the room again to see who was within listening range. The few servants present in the room were all cowering in the corners.

"I have need to speak with you in private," the general replied. "May we retire to your study?"

The king raised his sword threateningly and his mouth opened wide to shout an answer, but his energy was spent. He dropped the sword on the floor and nodded. Without a word, the king turned and left the room. General Harford quickly followed the king and the two men entered the king's study. The general closed the door.

"What more bad news do you bring, Harford?" the king scowled as he walked around his desk and sat down.

"The duke's boy will survive," replied the general, "but he may lose his arm. The story he tells is frightening, and we need to discuss it before it spreads."

"Out with it then," snapped the king.

"The boy said that the soldier who killed your sons wore the patch of the 16th Corps."

"The 16th?" gasped the king. "Is he sure?"

"He says that he is certain," answered the general, "but the boy is not in his right mind. I don't know that we should take his word as truth, and I can't imagine how a Spinoan could have gotten into the palace, never mind out of it again. It makes no sense."

The king rose suddenly from his chair and the general flinched, but he need not have bothered. The king began pacing the floor behind his desk, his mind considering the implications of the Spinoans

sending someone to assassinate his sons. Eventually he stopped pacing and turned to face the general.

"Queen Samir is a despicable tyrant who would not hesitate to assassinate someone, but she gains nothing from killing Lyker and Lindmyr. Who came into the palace today, and who left?"

"Mostly the usual people," answered the general, "but there was one strange group. Captain Ergard and a squad of men from the 15th Corps arrived for supplies. They produced an authorization from General Montero to get supplies from the kitchens."

"Now we are onto something," snarled the king. "This is something that Montero would do."

"But they were only here for a few minutes," frowned the general. "They got their supplies and left. The guard in the kitchens watched them the entire time."

"Did he?" challenged the king. "Then he will be able to tell us how the kitchen maid happened to end up slain in the same room with my sons. I was wondering what she was doing there, but now it makes sense. How else could an unauthorized soldier gain access to that wing of the palace if not through the servants' ways? That girl led the assassin to my sons. I want that guard properly interrogated."

"I will see to it," promised the general.

The general turned to leave, but the king was not finished with him. "I also want every member of the 15th Corps arrested."

The general turned and looked questioningly at the king. "There is an entire company of the 15th Corp in Ertak. You do realize that General Montero left them to safeguard Prince Harold?"

"Safeguard?" scoffed the king. "Is that what you call imprisonment these days?"

"Call it what you will," frowned the general, "but you are talking about a civil war. Ergard's company inhabits Montero's castle in the Dark Forest, and they will not surrender without a fight. I suspect that they are tasked to defend that castle to the death."

"Then they will die," King Harowin replied without concern.

"It is never that easy, Your Highness. General Montero has a strong following in all of the Ertakan armies, including my own 11th Corps. If it comes to a battle to take that castle, there will be heavy losses on both sides. Plus," he added with an ominous tone, "that will leave General Larus and his 34th Corps in charge of security in Farmin while my men are out in the Dark Forest. Are you sure that is wise?"

"Blast Jaar," snapped the king. "Have you discovered the reason for Kyrga posting the 34th Corps in Farmin?"

"I have not," frowned the general, "but it is not just Farmin. Valdo and Giza also have new armies posted to them, and each of the generals is sworn to Kyrga. I have a bad feeling about their purpose.

What if Montero is not behind the assassination at all? What if it is Emperor Jaar trying to foment a civil war to weaken our home guard? We would be playing right into his hand if we attacked the castle."

The king thought for a moment and then shook his head. "The assassinations have Montero's mark all over them. This is typical of what he would do."

"For what purpose?" asked General Harford. "Montero is already the Crown Prince. He gains nothing from the deaths of your other sons."

"He gains security," retorted the king. "With Lyker and Lindmyr dead, I cannot afford to lose Montero, or Ertak would have no heir." The king's eyes widened as if he had just seen something remarkable. "Harold! Montero no longer holds Harold in that castle of his. Either Harold is dead, or he has escaped. That is why Montero made his move. He no longer has a hold over me."

"That does make sense," agreed the general, "but I still advise against attacking the castle."

"Forget the castle," stated the king. "Arrest Captain Ergard and his squad of men before they reach the safety of the castle. Given the proper incentive, those men will tell us what we need to know."

* * * *

Jenneva stood at the gates to the Everich estate while Alex refastened the wheel onto the mortician's wagon. Darkness had claimed the sky, but not before Jenneva had managed to get a good look at the estate. The great building that had once housed the King's Advisor no longer existed. In its place a field of debris was scattered across the ground. There was no sign of life, but she knew from Alex's attitude that she was missing something. She waited patiently for him to finish. A soft whistle caused her to turn around. Alex waved her to the wagon and then hopped up onto the seat. Jenneva turned away from the destruction and mounted the wagon.

"You owe me an explanation," she said simply.

"I do." Alex nodded. "Duke Everich's estate had a very unique feature about it. Of the people assembled tonight, only Arik and I knew about it, and Balamor and Theos kept the king's mind shielded, so there was no chance of Artimor learning the secret as long as we did not tell anyone else."

"What feature?" asked Jenneva.

"An access hatch to the city sewers," grinned Alex. "It was one of the reasons that Everich bought the estate. It allowed him secret access to his minions of the underworld. The day that you and Tanya were struck down during the Battle of Tagaret, Arik and I used the sewers to sneak onto this estate and destroy the nest of black-devils hiding here. That led to the plan used tonight. As soon as everyone

entered the front door of the mansion, Arik led them out the back and into the sewers. That is why the timing of our arrival was so critical. We only needed a few moments of distraction to give the king time to make good his escape."

"Are you sure that they did escape?" frowned Jenneva.

"I am certain," smiled Alex. "I timed it myself this afternoon, and Arik knew the numbers well before we left the palace. Let's get back there and inform them of Artimor's death."

"And then what?" asked Jenneva.

"The king will make a speech to the citizens in the morning. He will explain about the demonkin and the tainted boots. The people will be told to destroy any boots bought from Artimor or repaired by him. The irritability and sickness will simply disappear."

"So I am free to join you in battle up north?" asked Jenneva.

"You are. In fact, the others will be coming with us."

"The others?"

"Arik, Tanya, and Theos," stated Alex. "I am not sure about Balamor."

"The king and queen are going into battle? Is that wise?"

"They must," nodded Alex. "Although getting rid of the boots will cure the sickness, it will not happen overnight, and the soldiers cannot march without boots. The army will be of no help against Team Miram, and the Rangers and Red Swords cannot handle the enemy alone. Besides, they are still the Warrior King and Warrior Queen. They will be fine."

Jenneva sighed anxiously. It was not that she doubted the skills of Arik and Tanya, but things grew chaotic during a battle. She knew that anything could happen.

* * * *

The gypsies crept through the tall grass as silently as myrics. When they reached the bank of the river, Adan rose slightly and glanced around. He saw no one. Sticking a finger in his pocket, the King of the Gypsies woke his fairy. Instantly a chubby male fairy shot out of the pocket and landed on the gypsy's shoulder.

"Take a look around, Moth," ordered Adan. "Let me know if any of the Federation soldiers are within hearing distance. We are going to make a fair amount of noise tonight."

Moth waddled to the end of Adan's shoulder and threw himself off. His wings beat furiously, and for a moment it appeared as if he would fall to the ground. He did not. Moth's strong wings soon propelled him upward at a furious pace and the chubby fairy disappeared into the night sky.

"I guess Prince Midge has run out of able recruits," frowned Kyle. "Moth should not be used in the field."

“What are you talking about?” quipped Laman. “Moth is a great fairy. He is easily worth one and a half of any other fairy.”

“Knock it off,” Adan said to the men from Lavinda. “Moth is already rather self-conscious about his weight. The other fairies rib him mercilessly. We do not need to add to his misery.”

“But can he function?” countered Kyle. “I did not speak to hurt his feelings. I am truly concerned about his ability to do the task and remain unseen. He is rather large.”

“Moth has performed admirably,” answered Adan. “He has never failed an assignment, and I do not expect that to change tonight.”

Several minutes passed in silence before Moth returned. He glided down out of the sky and landed on Adan’s shoulder with a thud.

“The Federation soldiers are nowhere near the bridges,” the fairy reported. “They are all within their camp.”

Adan raised an eyebrow at the report.

“You seem concerned,” Kyle said suspiciously.

“No,” Adan shook his head. “It is just unexpected. I thought once they discovered that there was no way to go north that they might post sentries by the bridges to secure them. It is their only way out of the swamp.”

“Let’s remove the bridges before they discover their mistake,” suggested Laman.

Adan nodded as he rose to his feet and signaled his men to advance. Laman and Kyle moved towards the bridges to supervise their removal, but Adan remained in the grass. He turned his head and looked at the fairy.

“You did well, Moth,” Adan said with a smile. “Now I need to send you on a more dangerous mission.”

“No danger is too great for the fairy people,” Moth replied. “How may I serve the King of the Gypsies?”

“I need to get word to Mandel and Hortice,” explained Adan. “They and their men are hidden in the swamp near the Federation camp. They will be difficult to find, even for a fairy.”

“Fairies can find anyone,” boasted Moth.

“I do believe that to be true,” Adan said with a smile, “but you should know by now that gypsies can hide rather well. You will need to stay close to the surface of the swamp to find them, and great dangers exist at that level, especially for creatures as small as yourself.”

Moth shuddered at the thought of being eaten by one of the giant reptiles, but he replied with courage, “I will deliver your message. What shall I say to them?”

“Tell them that the bridges are being removed,” instructed Adan. “They are now authorized to begin their portion of this mission. You

are to stay with them until they are done, Moth, just in case they need to send a message back. Find a safe place to wait and let Mandel and Hortice know where you will be. Above all, do not let the Federation see you."

"You can count on me," the fairy said reassuringly. "Fairies are never seen unless they want to be seen."

Adan chuckled as Moth rose in the sky. He felt for the chubby fairy, and his thoughts turned to Caroom. Caroom had been a giant of a gypsy, and his size had made him a bit of an outcast. Adan often wondered how much of an impact those hurt feelings had in the play of events. In the end, Caroom had turned against the gypsy people, and he had died for that betrayal, but Adan wondered if the gypsy people had made it easy for the giant to turn against his own people by making him feel as if he was not one of them. Adan shook his head as if to clear it of such thoughts and walked towards the bridges to watch them being dismantled.

Moth soared high over the swamp, but he approached the Federation camp with the night sky in mind. Being careful not to get between the enemy and the moon, the fairy gazed down at the inhospitable terrain. He could see no gypsies in the swamp, and he suddenly remembered Adan's instructions to fly low. Banking into a steep dive, the fairy shot downward with great speed. The tall grass rose towards him at a dizzying pace. He flared his wings out wide to slow his descent, but it was too little, too late. The tall blades of stiff grass whipped his body as he plowed through them, and he tumbled to the ground.

Moth pushed himself off the ground, the muck of the swamp sticking to his hands and oozing over his feet. He looked around, but he could not see a single pace in any direction. The grass was thick and tall, and he was stuck in the middle of it. He started tromping through the maze, but he had only gone a little ways when the noises around him caused him to halt in fear. He heard something large slithering through the grass to one side of him, and something very large soared directly overhead, its wings momentarily blotting out the moonlight. Moth shuddered with fear.

The fairy hesitantly turned towards the slithering noise, his eyes as large as buttons. Frozen with fear, he listened to the sound coming closer. Suddenly he saw the grass stalks moving and then he heard the hiss. A giant snake lifted its head up and sniffed the air, its forked tongue darting in and out of its mouth. Moth panicked. He screamed and ran, his tiny feet sloshing through the muck. The snake must have sensed its prey for it darted towards the fleeing fairy. Moth bounced off stalk after stalk as he hysterically raced for his life, the sounds of the slithering snake gaining on him with every step.

Eventually, Moth ran out of the patch of grass. He broke out into the open to find himself on the edge of a body of water. He flapped his wings furiously, but he was too exhausted to propel himself off the ground. He just could not get off the ground. Tears came to his eyes as he turned around and watched the giant snake approaching. The slithering beast halted as its tongue detected the fairy. It raised its head and lunged at Moth. The fairy closed his eyes and whimpered. The fairy trembled as he waited for the strike that would end his life, but it never came. Moth opened his eyes and saw the head of the snake mere inches from him, and then it was gone, flung off to some distant place by a large hand.

"You shouldn't play in the swamp, Moth," said the voice. "It is a very dangerous place, especially for fairies."

Moth frowned in confusion. He turned and saw an arm sticking out of the water, a human arm. He turned further and stared into the mud-covered face of Mandel. The gypsy was submerged in the water of the swamp, only his head and arm were above the surface.

"You saved my life," Moth said with awe and reverence. "I thought I was going to die."

"You just might have," Mandel said compassionately. "It happens to the best of us, but you are alive now. Rejoice and be thankful. What are you doing out here?"

Moth tried to stop his body from shivering, but he could not. He blushed with embarrassment, knowing that the gypsy had witnessed him cowering in fear. He was ashamed.

"Adan sent me to deliver a message to you and Hortice. The bridges are being removed and you are authorized to start your part of the mission."

"Excellent," smiled the gypsy. "I will inform Hortice and the others. Do you need help getting aloft?"

Moth broke down and cried. His head grew light and his limbs trembled so badly that he could not stand. He dropped into a sitting position and let the tears flow freely.

"I meant no slight by my words," Mandel said softly. "You have been through a trying ordeal. Even a gypsy would appreciate some help under those conditions."

"A gypsy would not cower in fear," mumbled Moth. "I am fat, and I am useless. And now I am a coward. You should have let the snake eat me."

"As long as you are assigned to Adan," Mandel said caringly, "you are a gypsy, Moth." Mandel reached out and cupped the fairy with his hand, holding him securely. "I have known fear in my life, and I know what it does to a man. You have no need to be embarrassed. You trying to fight off that snake would be the same as me trying to fend

off a dragon. There would be no option but to run for either of us. Calm yourself and then I will give you a boost to get you flying."

Moth shook his head. "Adan wants me to stay with you, in case you have need to send a message back."

"And you are willing to stay in the swamp?"

"It is my duty," answered the fairy. "I have no choice."

"We always have a choice, Moth."

"I will not abandon my duty," declared the fairy.

"Then you are far braver than you think," smiled Mandel. "Every man knows fear at one time or another. That is nothing to be ashamed of, but it takes true courage to stand firm in the face of fear. Let's find a reasonably safe perch for you while Hortice and I teach the Federation a lesson."

The gypsy moved silently through the water. First he joined up with Hortice and passed along Adan's message. He then found a small tree for Moth and placed him on a branch as high as he could reach.

"If the light is good," Mandel said in parting, "you will have a good view of the action. If you need to, you can glide off your perch to any one of us. Stay dry, my friend."

Mandel sunk back into the swamp and moved off towards the enemy encampment, which was well lit with roaring campfires. When he drew close to their perimeter, he met up again with Hortice and the others.

"The black-cloaks have split up," stated Hortice. "There are four of them to the right and four to the left."

"I will take the left," stated Mandel. "Take half the men and focus on the mages to the right. It is early yet, so they will not be anxious to confine themselves to the tents. They will probably try to keep near the fires so that the stinging flies and mosquitoes don't eat them alive. Try to kill them when they wander off to relieve themselves, or anytime that you can get one of them alone. When you have killed them all, return to Moth's tree."

Hortice nodded and selected three men to join him. Mandel led the other three men to the left. The grassy island where the Federation armies were camped was relatively dry ground, but watery channels ran through it in all directions. Sometimes the channels were so narrow that you could step over them, but other times they were wide enough to force you to go around them. Almost all of the channels were fairly deep, even the narrow ones. The setup was ideal for the gypsy mission, and Mandel's men soon split up to cover as much of the left portion of the encampment as possible. As was Mandel's nature, he took the most precarious section for himself, never willing to order a man to do something that he would not do himself.

Mandel was a patient warrior, which was necessary this evening.

It took nearly three hours before he finally managed to get near a black-cloak relieving himself. The mage broke away from a group of soldiers near one of the big fires, and the soldiers were glad to see him leave. Mandel anticipated the mage's path and slowly moved through one of the channels to get close. He eased a reed and a myric quill out of his small quiver and fed the quill into the reed. As the gypsy got into position, he spooked one of the large carnivorous reptiles that had been resting in a dark spot on the mud bank. The large creature slithered off the mud and disappeared under the water. Mandel tried not to think about it. He had run into the creatures several times already, and so far they had not tried to attack him. He hoped his luck endured through the night.

Moments later, the black-cloak appeared on the bank of the channel. Mandel wasted no time. He brought the reed to his lips and blew the quill into the mage's stomach. The mage's body stiffened and fell forward, loudly splashing into the water, directly onto the giant reptile that had moved away from the gypsy. The creature immediately attacked the mage's body, thrashing violently as its massive jaws clamped down on the black-cloak's leg. The beast shook the body noisily and then dragged it under the water, but not before some soldiers had taken notice of the event. Mandel smiled as he put the reed to his lips and slid under the water before the running soldiers arrived to gawk at the black-cloak's demise.

Hours later, Mandel and his men met up with Hortice below the tree where Moth was perched. The eight gypsies were waterlogged and tired.

"We have failed," sighed Hortice.

"Seven out of eight is not exactly a failure," replied Mandel, "but neither is it a success. Perhaps the last black-cloak will come out of his tent early in the morning."

"Why don't we go in the tent and finish this?" asked Hortice.

"Because we have been forbidden to do so," answered Mandel. "Were it up to me, that is exactly what I would do, but Adan has made it clear that the gypsies will not enter the mage's tents."

"One battle mage can kill hundreds of our people," protested Hortice. "They must all die for this trap to work."

"You will get no argument from me," Mandel agreed, "but we will follow our orders. If the last mage does not give us the opportunity we need by dawn, you will take the rest of the men back to dry ground."

"And you will do what?" frowned Hortice. "You will attack him in broad daylight on the trail tomorrow? That is suicide."

"I am not happy about our choices," frowned Mandel, "but I understand what must be done. The last black-cloak will die before he gets back to where the bridges were. I will not allow him to kill our

people."

"I am not forbidden from entering the tent," chirped Moth.

The gypsies glanced up at the chubby fairy.

"We need to do more than just put him asleep," stated Hortice.

"And you cannot levitate him out of the tent without getting caught," added Mandel.

"I will stab him with a quill," Moth said with determination.

One of the gypsies laughed and Mandel shot the man a glare. The laugh died instantly.

"You carrying a quill would be like one of us holding a tree out before us," said Hortice. "Even if you could carry it, a fairy would never have enough force to stab it into the mage's body."

"I can do it," declared the fairy. "Will you sacrifice your people because you do not believe me?"

"You do not have to do this to impress us, Moth," Mandel said softly. "We are already impressed with the fairy people."

"You said earlier that we always have choices, Mandel," retorted the fairy. "I am making this choice because I believe that I will be successful where others cannot be, not to impress you. Will you deny me my chance to strike out at evil?"

Mandel stared at the little man, and he liked what he saw. He smiled and nodded. "I will give you whatever chance you want, Moth, but I expect you to act with clear thought and without emotion. Can you promise me that?"

"I can and I do," the fairy said with confidence. "Ready me a quill. I will be right back."

Moth took a running leap off the branch. His body dropped towards the ground, but his wings soon provided the lift he needed. He soared skyward and headed for the Federation encampment. The mage tent was not hard to find, and he flew right into it. For a moment, he hovered in the dark staring at the empty bunks. When he found the bunk that was occupied, he noted its location and retreated outside. He flew up and landed on the roof of the tent and visualized where the occupied bunk was below. He then found the nearest seam and pulled his knife. It took him several minutes to cut through the stitching with his knife, but when he was done, the section of the roof over the sleeping black-cloak hung down into the tent. Moth sheathed his knife and threw himself off the roof. Minutes later he landed on the tree branch above the gypsies.

"Hand me a quill," ordered the fairy.

Mandel extracted a quill and held it out for the fairy to grasp. Moth grabbed it with both hands and held it above his head. His little face frowned as he tried to figure out how to launch himself.

"Would you like a boost?" asked Mandel.

“Yes,” the fairy nodded enthusiastically.

Mandel held out his palm and let Moth walk onto it. When the fairy signaled that he was ready, Mandel tossed the fairy high into the air. Moth’s wings beat frantically, but the boost had worked well. Before Moth reached the apex of the toss, his wings were already carrying him higher. He continued high into the sky before turning and heading towards the camp. When he was over the opening in the mage tent, he tilted the quill and let its weight pull him into a dive. Moth dove with a speed he had never achieved before, the extra weight propelling him downward at a frantic pace. He soared through the hole in the roof and the quill slammed into the mage. The force of the collision tossed the fairy roughly to the floor, but Moth stood up and dusted himself off, a wide grin spreading across his face.

Chapter 32

Day Ten

The soldiers of the advance scouting squad of Fortella's 2nd Corps of the Empire of Barouk were up early as they usually were. Dawn would not arrive for an hour, but their task required an early departure. The twenty men lit a small cooking fire, although there was precious little to cook. The caches had all been found empty so far, and the unseen Alceans continued to snipe at the foragers each night. The men brewed a pot of tea and checked their weapons, a daily routine that was more habit than thoughtful.

"Foggy," one of the men remarked.

"Comes with camping beside the river," replied another man. "It will lift when the dawn arrives."

The squad leader stood and stretched, tossing the rest of his tea into the fire. "We won't be here to see it lift," he quipped. "Finish up and get mounted. It is time to check the road ahead."

"Just to find another empty cache," one of the soldiers said softly as the sergeant strode away from the group. "I wish General Fortella would authorize an attack on these unseen Alceans. Then we could get some decent foraging done. There can't be more than a hundred of them out there."

"Why don't you go to the general's tent and wake him?" taunted one of the other soldiers. "I am sure that he will be interested in your suggestion."

The men all laughed as they doused the fire and headed towards the corral. Within minutes they were mounted and riding out of the camp. The sergeant took the point as he led his men downstream to the bridge that crossed the Boulder River. The bridge was an old wooden-planked structure with stone pillars supporting its long spans across the wide, swiftly flowing Boulder River. The horses' hooves tromped loudly in the stillness of the early morning, and the fog gave the sounds an eerie, almost spooky, quality. The fog persisted all the way across the river and well into the forest beyond, but the advance squad eventually emerged out of it. As dawn lightened the sky, the horsemen found their spirits lifted.

The Mya-Tagaret Road was well traveled and well maintained. It was broad and level for the most part, but there were no other travelers this day, nor did the squad expect any. It was clear from the empty caches that the Alceans knew that the armies were advancing

towards Tagaret, but there had been no attacks, other than sniping at the foragers. The typical Federation soldier thought that the Alceans seemed content to try to starve the Federation soldiers into retreating. Such a retreat was a laughable premise to anyone who had ever served under General Fortella. The Baroukan general did not know the meaning of retreat, and he was not about to learn it.

The sun was already well into the sky when the men began suggesting a halt for the midday meal, which would actually be little more than a rest and stretch break. The sergeant put the men off, hoping to cover another league before stopping. As they rounded a bend in the road, the squad leader suddenly halted and held his hand up to bring the rest of the riders to a stop. Huge trees blocked the road ahead, but the trees were not merely felled across the road, which would be bad enough to slow down the column for a few hours. The trees were felled in such a way as to present a multitude of branches pointing directly towards the Federation column. The sergeant sighed deeply as he imagined how long it would take to clear the road. All of the branches would have to be hacked off before men could even approach the trunk, and if the position was defended by the Alceans… He did not want to think about it.

"Abatis," scowled the sergeant. "I want the forests on both sides of the road searched for an alternate path around this obstacle. Proceed cautiously, and remember that we are in hostile territory."

The sergeant pointed to individual riders and then pointed in the direction they should search. Five men were dispatched to his right and five more were sent into the woods to his left. The remaining ten men moved away from the barricade and dismounted.

"This is different," commented one of them who had remained with the sergeant. "Do you think they plan to attack the column here?"

"It may just be to slow down the column," answered the sergeant, "but I would be foolish to assume that. Our task is to find a way around it and then report back to the column. If we do not find an alternate route close by, we will backtrack to find an alternate road to Tagaret. Cleaning up this obstacle might take the better part of a day, and General Fortella will not stand for that."

The sounds of snapped bowstrings sang out from both sides of the road. The sergeant turned and leaped onto his horse before the first of the screams reached his ears.

"Mount up!" shouted the sergeant.

"Fight or flee?" one of the men asked as he mounted his horse.

"We need to carry word to the general," answered the sergeant. "Retreat!"

The sergeant recognized the ambush for what it was. He knew

that staying and fighting would only serve the enemy's purpose, otherwise the Alceans would not have attacked. He kicked his horse into a gallop and called out for his men to follow him. Only moments later he heard more cries from his men, but the cries were close behind him. He turned and looked back to see his men falling off their horses as unseen archers alongside the road let their arrows fly. The sergeant put his head down and coaxed as much speed out of his horse as he could. After a minute of galloping along the road, he breathed a slow sigh of relief. He sat up and gazed back towards the ambush site, but he could see no pursuit. Thankful that he had been spared the fate of his men, the sergeant turned around to see two men standing in the road before him. His heart skipped a beat as he wondered whether to halt and seek safety in the forest or try to race through them. He drew his sword and shouted a war cry, but the men were unshaken. They each nocked an arrow and aimed at the charging rider. The sergeant stared at them and blinked.

"Elves?" he gasped. "We are fighting elves?"

Both arrows found homes in the sergeant's chest and his dead body tumbled off the horse.

* * * *

General Fortella rose earlier than normal. He wanted to reread the reports about the attacks on the foragers to see if there was a pattern to the timings or a flaw in the enemy's method that could be exploited. He had been hesitant to send units into the forest to engage the unseen enemy until he fully understood the risks involved. That philosophy had been fine for the first few days, but the meager supply of food was beginning to take its toll on the men, both physically and in terms of morale. Something had to be done to change the situation, and Fortella was determined that today was to be the day he reacted strongly. He got out of bed and lit a lantern, but noises from outside the tent caught his attention. He walked to the tent flap and peered out.

Dawn had not yet arrived, and fog had enshrouded the camp. He peered through the mist and saw a squad of cavalry riding towards the perimeter. He recognized it as the advance squad. He let the flap close and returned to the table. Gathering the reports, he spread them out on the table before him and began reading them one more time, making notes when he saw something that might be important. An hour went by before he realized it, and Colonel Tamora entered the tent with mugs of tea and plates of food. The colonel looked at the cluttered table, and failing to find a safe place to set down the food, waited for the general to notice him. The general sensed the colonel and looked up.

"Anywhere, Tamora," the general said with distraction. "Whitman

is not even up yet. Wake him before you leave."

"I will, General," replied the colonel as he set the plates and mugs on top of the reports. "It is dawn, General. Shall I start the column moving?"

"Yes." The general nodded. "Same formation as yesterday. Alert me when the 2nd Corps cavalry has completely left the camp."

"As you wish," the colonel replied before leaving the table.

General Fortella picked up a mug and sipped some tea, turning his attention back to the reports. Some time later, General Whitman pulled out a chair and sat down on the opposite side of the table. General Fortella ignored the Aertan general and continued perusing the reports.

"It's quite foggy out this morning," commented General Whitman. "Perhaps it would be better to hold off the column for a couple of hours."

General Fortella seethed at the cowardly words. Whitman and his men were afraid of everything. The man should never have been made a general. Matching him up with Whitman had probably been Kyrga's idea of a joke, but Fortella was not laughing. He once again vowed silently to take out his wrath on the Grand General when he returned to Despair.

Despite his inner rage, General Fortella's voice was calm when he spoke, "I have seen the fog. I watched the advance scouts leave the camp this morning. As for your request, be thankful that your army follows mine. By the time your 24th Corps leaves the camp, the sun will be high in the sky and the fog will have burned off. As for my 2nd Corps, the cavalry has already begun their departure. Now, if you will allow me a period of silence, I would like to finish analyzing these reports."

Sufficiently rebuffed, General Whitman stood and left the tent. General Fortella continued reading the reports and making notes. After a while, he heard the rousing of the infantry forming up outside the tent. He gathered his papers and stowed them well before the colonel came into the tent to inform him that the last of the 2nd Corps cavalry were leaving the camp.

"Have my horse brought to me," commanded the general. "I will ride with the cavalry today."

The Baroukan general prepared himself for battle and stepped out of the tent. He mounted his horse and rode downstream towards the bridge. The infantry companies already packing the path to the bridge stepped aside and made way for the general. Fortella reached the bridge area just as the first infantry company was preparing to start across. The captain of the company saw the general approaching and halted the column so that the general's crossing would be unimpeded.

By the time the general started crossing the bridge, the tail end of the 2nd Corps cavalry was already halfway across.

General Fortella looked down at the swiftly flowing river and the swirling mists above it. Visibility directly over the river was actually better than on the banks, and he glanced upstream and downstream. While gazing downstream, he detected movement out of the corner of his eye on the opposite bank. He frowned as he focused on the wooded bank. He saw a man race out of the forest and throw something at the far end of the bridge. That section of the bridge instantly burst into flames, horses and men screaming out in terror. The general immediately pulled his mount to a halt and stared at the attacker in horror. The man hurled something in his direction. Fortunately for the general, the river was wide, and the attacker's strength was insufficient to reach entirely across the river. The object struck the wooden planks of the bridge not twenty paces in front of General Fortella, and the planks burst into flames. The general turned his horse and raced off the bridge.

When the general reached the end of the bridge, he dismounted and stormed to the bank of the river. The shouts and cries of his men were clearly heard, and he saw men and horses being pulled downstream by the swift current. What shocked him more than the attack was the sight of some of the bridge planks burning even as they were being carried downstream. The water did not appear to be extinguishing the fire.

"What in the world are we up against?" he muttered to himself.

"I believe it was an elf, General," said a voice alongside him.

General Fortella turned to see Colonel Tamora beside him. "What are you talking about?"

"The man who threw the objects," answered the colonel. "He certainly dressed like an elf."

The general was about to berate the colonel for making wild assumptions about how the unmet Alceans dressed when he suddenly remembered that Colonel Tamora had been to Alcea the previous fall. He would know what local customs the Alceans observed.

"Did you see any elves last fall?"

"No, General," the colonel shook his head, "but the man was dressed as the elves in Elfwoods dressed. Could the Dielderal have made it all the way to Alcea?"

"It is hard for me to imagine an elf with the courage to expose himself long enough to attack a Federation column, but that is not what I was remarking on when you arrived. Look at the debris floating downstream. It still burns, even when underwater. It must be magic of some kind."

"And we are without mages," the colonel stated.

“I am more concerned about being without cavalry,” replied the general as he gazed across the river at the tail end of his two-thousand-man cavalry detachment.

“We still have the cavalry of the 24th Corps,” the colonel said with an air of optimism.

“I will not trust my flanks to Aertan cavalry,” snapped General Fortella. “Find me a way to get across this river, and be quick about it.”

* * * *

Princess Rhula of the Elderal elves watched the general of the Federation army turn tail and run from the burning bridge. She smiled broadly.

“An unexpected surprise, brother,” she said softly to Prince Garong beside her. “Did you see him scurry away from the bridge? Too bad we didn’t wait just a moment longer. The enemy column would be crippled by the loss of its leader.”

“The timing was perfect for accomplishing our goal,” replied the Knight of Alcea as he stirred his fairy to life. “The Baroukan cavalry has been isolated. Now it is time to kill them.”

Sprout shot upward to Prince Garong’s shoulder and rubbed his sleepy eyes. “Is it killing time already?” he asked. “I feel as if I just closed my eyes.”

“It is time,” nodded the elven prince. “Carry word to the others and be swift about it.”

“I will spread the word faster than an elven arrow,” vowed the fairy.

Sprout shot up into the canopy and disappeared. Prince Garong watched the near end of the bridge to see what the tail end of the cavalry column would do. He expected a certain amount of confusion as to whether they should follow the vanguard or stay near the river until a new way across could be established. He was not disappointed. Loud arguing broke out among the riders, and one rider was sent towards the vanguard to report on the bridge’s destruction. Two squads were assigned to ride along the banks of the river in opposite directions seeking another bridge or a ford. The rest of the small group, which Prince Garong estimated to be about one-hundred men, dismounted and remained by the burning bridge. The elven prince turned to his sister.

“It is time to go,” declared the Knight of Alcea.

“What about the scouting parties coming along the bank of the river?” asked Princess Rhula. “You intend to leave them alive?”

“The cavalry column is over half a league long,” replied the prince. “You will have plenty of soldiers to kill without endangering yourself so close to the bulk of the enemy. Leave the scouts alone.”

Princess Rhula pouted, but she nodded obediently. The two elves faded deeper into the forest and disappeared.

* * * *

Captain Plaggor was a member of the 2nd Corps cavalry, and his place in the cavalry column was somewhere in the middle. He usually enjoyed the early morning rides as he found it exciting to be among the first Zarans to explore this part of Alcea, but the morning's fog had dampened his spirit. He could see a fair distance ahead of him, but the fog appeared thicker along the sides of the road. He could see the first couple of rows of trees, but nothing else. He slumped down in his saddle and prepared for a boring ride.

Soon he heard shouting from behind him and he turned in his saddle to see what the commotion was. At first he could see nothing because of the fog, but he eventually understood the commotion. A rider was trying to reach the vanguard, but the column already took up all of the road. The riders shouted curses at the man, but he seemed to care little as he forced his way between files. Captain Plaggor intentionally moved closer to the rider next to him to make the hurried man's passage a little easier. After the rider had passed, the captain resumed his normal position.

"Must be an urgent message to brave disrupting the column," the captain said to no one in particular.

"If it's not important," the rider next to the captain chuckled, "he will find himself walking tomorrow. You can be sure that the colonel will hear earfuls about the rider at camp tonight. You just don't disrupt a column, especially in hostile territory."

Sudden shouts came from the riders far ahead of the captain, and he initially dismissed them as more complaints about the messenger, but he then realized that the shouts were more alarming than curses, and they were getting closer. The captain rose up on his stirrups and peered into the fog. He frowned as he saw men falling off their horses in the distance. He stared intently and focused his listening on the column ahead. The riders before him were falling off their horses like a wave flowing towards him, and the shouts were now recognized as cries of pain and surprise. And then he heard the telltale song of bow snaps.

The captain gave no conscious thought to his actions, but he instinctively dove off his horse and rolled into the forest as the bow snaps grew louder. He heard the surprised cries of pain from his comrades as the wave of death passed by, and he quickly crawled under the cover of a large bush. He peered out at the road as the sounds of cries diminished, the wave moving away towards the bridge they had crossed earlier.

At first, the captain saw nothing other than riderless horses

milling about, but eventually he saw the attackers. He gasped softly as elves silently exited the forest and began checking the bodies of the soldiers. Judging from what he could see, there were very few survivors of the attack, but the elves spared none of them as they gathered the horses and led them away. The captain quaked with fear the whole time, and his body continued to shiver long after the elves were gone. Vowing to remain hidden until the rest of the column appeared, the captain waited for hours before realizing that the rest of the column was not following the vanguard. By that time, the fog had burned off, and the sun was high in the sky.

Captain Plaggor crawled out from under the bush and hesitantly made his way to the edge of the road. He looked in both directions and felt his stomach grumble. Whether the feeling was from hunger or disgust at the sight of all the bodies, he was not sure. The bodies littered the road as far as he could see in each direction, and none of them were stirring. Gathering as much courage as he could, the captain eased out of the forest and turned towards the bridge. He started walking.

As high sun approached, the captain heard the distant sounds of lumbermen. He eased towards the side of the road and slowed his pace, not wanting to stumble upon the elves. Eventually, the river came into view, and the captain realized the woodcutting was coming from the Federation camp. He breathed a sigh of relief and felt the tension drain from his body. He walked boldly down the center of the road, his relief visibly evident in the spring of his step. Unexpectedly, two men emerged from the trees on each side of the road, their swords drawn. Captain Plaggor grinned broadly at the men. They were riders of the 2nd Corps.

“Plaggor?” one of the men asked as he recognized the survivor. “Are there any others coming this way?”

The grin fell from the captain’s face, and he shook his head. “They are all dead,” he said sadly.

“You need to get across the river,” one of the men said to the captain as he pointed to a rope stretched across the river. “General Fortella will want to know what you have seen. Be careful. The logs are not very stable yet.”

The captain nodded and moved towards the riverbank. The Zarans had felled trees and shoved them into the river where they rested against the stone pillars that had supported the original bridge. A rope ran across the river directly above the logs, and the captain grasped it firmly before stepping onto the crude replacement bridge. He moved slowly, but the danger of the temporary bridge never registered in his mind. He was just thankful to be alive, and things that might have frightened him before no longer seemed so scary.

Within a few minutes, the captain was across the river and was escorted to the large command tent. General Fortella waved him to a chair.

“I understand that you survived the attack,” opened the general. “Tell me what you know about it.”

The captain thought the general was asking him why he had survived while the others had died, and he felt compelled to lie.

“There was a messenger trying to speed his way through the column,” stated Captain Plaggor. “We bumped and I was thrown off my horse. That is the only reason that I survived the attack.”

“I sent the messenger,” a voice said from the side of the tent. “Where in the column were you, Captain?”

Captain Plaggor turned to see a colonel off to his side. “I was somewhere in the middle,” he answered.

“So the messenger never made it to the vanguard,” sighed the colonel.

“He did not make it far past me,” confirmed the captain. “I fell just as the attack reached my area of the column.”

“Reached your area of the column?” questioned the general. “What do you mean?”

“It was like a wave, General. I could hear the cries of surprise and pain rippling down the road towards me, but there was no time to react to it. The men never knew what hit them.”

“That would take thousands of archers for such an attack,” frowned the general. “Your column had to be over a half league in length. Has the whole Alcean army taken the field against us?”

“It wasn’t Alceans, General,” reported the captain. “It was elves.”

Chapter 33

Meeting the Enemy

General Mobami, governor of the province of Sordoa, sat on his horse atop a hill in the middle of the Coastal Highway between Caldar and Trekum. Next to him sat Sergeant Musaraf, his long and loyal confidant. Before them, the road rolled down the hillside, across a wide valley, and up another hill. The valley and the hills were treeless with grain fields that had only recently sprung to life. The two men sat motionless, waiting for the enemy to appear.

"I don't like this plan," complained Sergeant Musaraf. "These people are invaders. We shouldn't expose ourselves until our swords are drawn, and even then the enemy should be caught unawares."

"King Arik requires that we capture as many of the enemy as possible," replied General Mobami. "That requires giving them a chance to surrender. Besides, I am loathe to commit my forces while another enemy army marches up from the south. We may yet be forced to flee from this army and defend the walls of Trekum."

"That has never been the Sordoan way," frowned the sergeant. "We are riders of the plains, not Targans who hide behind their walls."

General Mobami smiled. "You have yet to lose the mentality of the old days. The Targans were never that predictable. We were just led to believe that they were. Perhaps that is why they bested us in every war."

"How can you speak against your own kin like that?" scowled the sergeant. "We are Sordoans."

"And now Alceans," retorted the general. "You misunderstand me, Musaraf. I am proud to be a Sordoan. There are no better horsemen in all the world, but I am not so insecure as to deny the successes of others. We did not lose the wars against Targa because our fighters were inferior. We lost because our leaders were men of privilege rather than talented strategists."

"Well, now you lead," Musaraf pointed out. "Why do we not attack the enemy?"

"I will lead the battle," General Mobami replied, "but we serve King Arik now. He is the strategist for this war, and I bow before him. You may think that is foolish, but I consider it a privilege to serve the Warrior King. We will give the enemy every opportunity to surrender. That is our duty. If they continually refuse to surrender, our duty will

be to kill them all, and you will find no better leader than me when that time comes. Have patience, my friend. We will prevail."

"Look!" Sergeant Musaraf pointed towards the opposite hill.

Twenty horsemen crested the distant hill, their red uniforms announcing the arrival of the enemy.

"It is their advance scouts," stated the general. "The vanguard will not be far behind. Take the banner and go down the slope three-hundred paces. Make sure it is clearly visible."

Sergeant Musaraf nodded and picked up the standard bearing a flag of truce. He held it high and rode down the slope, planting it into the ground when he had ridden the prescribed distance. The Federation squad halted. Cautiously, two riders separated from the squad and rode forward. They halted before the flag of truce. General Mobami rode down the hillside and stopped alongside Sergeant Musaraf.

"I am General Mobami, Governor of Sordoa. I wish to speak under a flag of truce with General Omirro. Carry my words to him."

The Federation squad leader looked around warily. He returned his eyes to the governor and said, "Some of my men will escort you to General Omirro. Follow me."

"I will wait here for him," General Mobami replied. "I understand he is on his way here anyway."

The squad leader raised an eyebrow at the general's words, but he merely nodded in acknowledgement. The two Federation riders turned and headed back towards the rest of the squad.

"You men will stay here," ordered the squad leader. "Keep a watch on the governor and his comrade, but avoid contact with them."

The squad leader left his men and galloped back towards the vanguard of Team Caldar. When he did reach the vanguard, he found General Omirro and General Barbone riding side-by-side. The sergeant turned his horse and rode alongside General Omirro.

"We have made contact with the enemy," the squad leader reported. "Two riders appeared on the road under a flag of truce. One of the men claims to be General Mobami, Governor of Sordoa. He has requested a meeting with you."

"For what purpose?" asked General Omirro.

"He would not say, General. I offered to convey him to you, but he refused. He said that he understood that you were already heading his way, and that he would just wait for you."

"So our column has been sighted and reported," remarked General Barbone. "It was inevitable, but I am surprised it took the Sordoans so long."

"That may not be the case," frowned the sergeant. "He asked for a

meeting with General Omirro by name."

"By name?" echoed General Omirro. "Are you sure that you did not slip up and offer to convey him to me by name?"

"I am certain, General. It struck me odd at the time to hear the Sordoan use your name."

General Omirro frowned and stared blankly ahead, his thoughts pondering the information that the Alceans appeared to have acquired. Already they seemed to have known enough to find the black-cloaks in his camp and eliminate them. Someone had also learned the locations of his caches and seen fit to empty them. They had also discovered the portals and removed them, cutting off any chance of retreat or reinforcements. And now they knew the name of the commanding general. How could they have such information?

The Ertakan general shook his head as if to clear it and addressed the sergeant, "Ready a company of cavalry to accompany me and General Barbone. We are going to meet with the Governor of Sordoa."

The sergeant saluted and peeled off from the column.

"We are both going?" asked General Barbone. "Is that wise? Shouldn't one of us remain behind in case it is a trap?"

"A trap?" questioned General Omirro. "The Sordoans have already had a chance to kill both of us when they invaded our encampment. If they wished our armies to be leaderless, they would have chosen our tents to attack instead of the black-cloaks. No, Barbone, they truly do wish to talk. I am curious about what they want to talk about, but I am more interested in discovering how much they know about us. They seem to know far more than they should."

A captain appeared alongside the generals and announced that his company was ready to escort them to the meeting place. General Omirro signaled his approval and the captain led them forward past the vanguard. Less than an hour later, they crested a hill and halted.

"My squad is at the bottom of the hill," stated the sergeant. "Do you have orders for them?"

General Omirro gazed across the valley at the two small figures sitting atop their horses. His eyes then scanned the entire valley and the opposing hill before answering the sergeant.

"No, Sergeant. General Barbone and I will proceed to the center of the valley and wait for the Governor to come to us. Your men will wait where they are, but they will remain vigilant. Captain, those orders apply to your company as well. This meeting is to be one of talk. You will respond only if the Sordoans attack."

Without further words, General Omirro started down the side of the hill. General Barbone hurried to catch up to him, and the two generals rode out into the valley until they had covered half the distance between the two hills. There they halted, well short of where

the governor waited for them. For several minutes, nothing happened, but eventually the Sordoans understood that the meeting place had been moved. They rode forward to meet the Federation generals.

"General Omirro," greeted the tall, bald governor, his large mustache almost appearing as a broad smile. "I see that you decided to bring General Barbone with you. I extend greetings to both of you. I am General Mobami, Governor of Sordoa."

General Omirro raised an eyebrow at the mention of the Spinoan general's name. "You seem to know a great deal about us, General Mobami. How is that possible?"

"All things are possible," grinned the governor. "I know that your rise to leadership began in the cavalry, unlike many of your peers. I suppose that might be why you were assigned to Force Sordoa. We are, after all, known for our horses and our nomadic way of life. You would probably enjoy your retirement here, but it will not happen under the Federation flag. I have come to ask for your surrender."

General Omirro was shocked, but he did not let it show. The Sordoan's knowledge of his background surely pointed to a spy in Zara, but it was the governor's use of the term Force Sordoa that struck General Omirro the hardest. That indicated a knowledge that was strategic in nature. Such knowledge had been confined to only those in the highest levels of the Federation until just recently. He decided to press further.

"You have pluck," chuckled General Omirro, "and a great spy to be sure, but if your information was as complete as you pretend, you would not be here making such a foolish offer. Let us dispense with the posturing. You know what is coming down that road behind me. The fate of Sordoa has already been decided. Nothing you can do will alter that. The speech that should be coming from your lips is a request for mercy."

"So, we are talking plainly?" retorted General Mobami. "Fine. I prefer things laid out for all to see. The truth is, General Omirro, you are invading my homeland, and that displeases me greatly. As a Sordoan, I would like nothing better than to destroy you and your entire column, but my allegiance is to King Arik, and he has requested that I try to seek your surrender before committing to battle. That is why I am here today. Still, I cannot beat sense into a stone. If you wish to end up like Gattas and Montero, I will be more than happy to oblige you."

General Omirro's eyes narrowed at the mention of Gattas and Montero. The governor's words showed that the Sordoans knew of at least two of the three prongs sent against them. General Omirro could not believe that the Sordoans had defeated the 6th Corps and the 15th Corps, but if a battle did occur south of Trekum with Sordoan forces

large enough to even engage Team Pontek, that meant the governor was traveling with practically no army at all. That thought provoked General Omirro into pressing his advantage.

"You talk boldly, Governor, for a man with no army. Perhaps I could hasten the conclusion to this war by seizing you right here and now."

"Only a despicable Zaran would violate a flag of truce," spat the governor as he raised his right hand to shoulder height, "but I am willing to forgive this one transgression. Hear my words carefully, though. If you ever even mention violating a flag of truce again, I will personally kill you when you do so."

General Omirro had watched the governor carefully to see what the man was made of. He was not surprised by the strong reaction, but his observation was interrupted when General Barbone gasped. General Omirro glanced at the Spinoan general and saw him looking up the hill. Omirro let his own eyes rise to see what had surprised Barbone. The Ertakan general, who was known for hiding his emotions, also gasped. The crest of the hill was crowded with Sordoan horsemen, thousands of Sordoan horsemen. General Omirro turned his head from one side to the other as he took in the full measure of what he was seeing. As far as he could see in either direction, the horsemen lined the crest.

General Omirro immediately thought of his own troops across the valley. He turned to see what his one-hundred-twenty men were doing. They were all mounted and holding their weapons as if ready to dash out to save their general. He held his hand up high and signaled for them to dismount. Only when they were all dismounted did he return his attention to the governor.

"That was well played, Governor. I offer my apology for making light of a flag of truce. I truly would not have seized you, but I did want to see your reaction to such a statement. Again, I apologize."

"Accepted," General Mobami said curtly. "Will you surrender?"

"No," replied General Omirro. "You are correct that I am a cavalry man, but I have learned to respect the footman. Our infantry is well trained in battle against cavalry. Even with large numbers behind you, we will devastate your forces. Besides, now that you know about Gattas and Montero, you must also realize that time is against you. If I keep your army here engaged with mine, Gattas will march unopposed and take Trekum. You are caught in a vice, Governor. Save us all some bloodshed and give up."

"You are a fool, Omirro," scowled General Mobami. "Gattas and Montero are already dead, along with every single man of the 6th Corps and the 15th Corps. And if you think I am unaware of Ritka and Stemple, you are an even greater fool. They will meet their demise

tomorrow. Then it will be just me and you. I am beginning to look forward to that confrontation. Good day, General."

General Mobami and Sergeant Musaraf turned and rode away, leaving the flag of truce planted in the dirt. The Federation generals watched them disappear over the crest and then all of the Sordoan riders disappeared.

"Can he be telling the truth?" General Barbone asked anxiously.

"It was all utter nonsense," General Omirro replied. "There are less fighters in all of Sordoa than in our two armies alone. The Sordoans are probably making the same pitch to Gattas and Ritka right now. They will undoubtedly be saying that you and I are already dead and our armies wiped out. No, Barbone, it was all a farce, but I will say that it was a game well played. The governor, if that is truly who he was, has played this game before. He knew exactly what to say and how to say it. He actually tricked me into saying that I might violate the truce just so he could show his army to us. It was supposed to rankle us."

"It certainly surprised me," admitted General Barbone. "When our foragers are attacked each night, I keep thinking that a small group is harassing us, trying to keep us on edge, but Mobami's army is no small group. There were thousands of men up there, and they were not pretty boys playing soldier. Those men were warriors. You could see it in how they moved and sat. We will have a fight on our hands, Omirro."

"Don't get soft on me, Barbone," scowled General Omirro. "The Sordoans have never won a war in their entire history. This is not going to be any exception to that streak. I assure you of that."

* * * *

The Alcean Ranger stared at the small flock of blackbirds flying over the Boulder Mountains. He did not have to watch them for long before determining that they were not truly birds. From his perch in a cleft on the face of the vertical canyon, the Ranger glanced down at the canyon floor and the two black-cloak bodies that had died there. He looked up in the sky again and tried to determine how long it would take the seekers to discover what they were looking for. Without taking his eyes off the birds, he woke up his fairy. The fairy stretched and yawned as she stuck her tiny blue head out of the pocket.

"Can't the message wait?" asked Petite. "I was just having the most delicious dream."

"The dream will have to wait," Steffen replied, refusing to be distracted from watching the birds. "Our prey has arrived. Warn the others that we have only a few minutes, and make sure that Kinelli is awake. The whole flock seems to have come hunting today."

Petite shot up to the Ranger's shoulder and peered into the sky. She started jumping up and down excitedly and then shot out of the crevice like a fired arrow. Steffen chuckled inwardly, but the humor lasted only a second. He pulled three arrows out of his quiver by touch and then strung his bow as he counted the birds. When he only counted twelve of them, he frowned and began searching the sky again. There was one missing.

The minutes dragged by as the birds circled around several times before flying over the steep canyon. Suddenly, the birds all gathered together, and Steffen knew that the bodies had been sighted. The birds were wary, very wary. For several long minutes the flock circled high while two birds dropped lower, inviting an attack. Nothing happened. Another pair of birds left the flock and dropped even lower, moving along the steep walls of the canyon, inspecting any ledges that might be used for archers. Steffen smiled. While there were ledges along the canyon walls that would have made excellent perches, his men were not on them. They were concealed in the narrowest and darkest crevices of the canyon walls. The hiding spots chosen would impair each Ranger's field of vision, but birds did not hover as fairies did. They would have to keep moving, causing them to pass more than one archer. Once the flock was lured into the canyon, there would be no escape for them.

For over ten minutes the birds proceeded cautiously, pairs of them dropping ever farther into the chasm, daring a hidden archer to take a shot at them. None did. Eventually, two of the birds landed on the floor of the canyon. That was the signal to attack because the Rangers dared not let the black-cloaks transform into human shape. Arrows flew out of crevices on both sides of the canyon, and birds started dropping to the ground. Steffen, holding the highest position of all the Rangers, only managed to kill one bird, but there were still two birds out of the twelve that had not entered the trap. Steffen saw them circling above and took aim, but the range was too great. Feeling safe from the threat of archers, the two birds continued to circle. Steffen knew what was going through their minds. A single battle mage could destroy all of the Rangers hidden in the canyon, and the black-cloaks were trying to decide how to approach the problem. They had to land somewhere to transform into their human form, but once they transformed, they had to return to the canyon to do battle. Their problem was that there was no decent landing spot close by, meaning they would have to climb around in the mountains to strike back and that would give the hidden archers time to flee. It was a difficult decision for the battle mages to make, but Steffen smiled broadly knowing that the decision would never be made.

While the two birds were still circling, a dragon appeared in the

sky. The birds did not notice the dragon at first, and that cost one of the birds its life. Kinelli grabbed one of the birds in her talons and crushed it as she gave chase to the other bird. The dragon and the bird passed out of Steffen's view, and the Ranger called out for a count of his men and a count of the birds killed. His men were all alive and ten of the birds had been killed. Kinelli got the eleventh bird and was chasing the twelfth. That still left one black-cloak unaccounted for, and Steffen did not care for loose ends.

High in the sky over the canyon, the thirteenth bird had watched everything. Baku had seen the Rangers destroying his men, and he had seen the dragon giving chase to the lone survivor. Wishing not to be seen by the dragon, Baku moved off in the opposite direction and landed in a wooded valley. There he spent the rest of the day until nightfall arrived. As soon as it was dark, he resumed his bird form and took to the sky. He flew all night and all day until he arrived at General Ross's camp. Exhausted from the flight, all he really wanted to do was sleep, but he entered the large command tent to make his report. General Ross looked up in surprise.

"You are back sooner than expected," the general said with a sense of unease. "What is wrong?"

"We have problems," sighed the black-cloak. "My men stumbled into a trap yesterday. They are all dead."

"Are you sure?" gasped the general.

"I watched them die," snapped the battle mage, letting his exhaustion get the better of him. "I am sorry. I am tired, but that is no reason to be rude. I have traveled all night and all day from the Boulder Mountains to get here. Yes, they are all dead. There are humans in this land. I would estimate only about a dozen, but they are highly skilled warriors, and their purpose for being here seems to be to eliminate your battle mages. They have been killing my men by shooting them while they were in bird form. We found the bodies of the last two men who never returned."

Baku opened his mouth to continue, but the general raised a hand to interrupt him. "I am not being critical as I know nothing about being a mage, but I am curious why you have returned. Couldn't a man of your power destroy a dozen warriors with ease?"

"Indeed," Baku nodded, "but it gets worse. There is also a dragon in this world."

"A dragon?" gasped the general. "Are you serious?"

"Very serious," frowned the black-cloak. "It is a huge creature and as vicious as any stories I ever heard about dragons. Its talons grabbed the last two of my men. Only I escaped. It is not safe to fly with such a beast around."

"Could this dragon be working with the warriors?" asked the

general.

“I do not know,” admitted the black-cloak. “I have been wondering about that for the entire flight here. It is either working with the warriors, or its timing was incredibly fortuitous for our enemies. The archers were unable to kill the last two men, but the dragon appeared before my mages were able to respond to the attack.” Baku sighed and shook his head. “There is something else about the dragon’s behavior that puzzles me. It did not devour my men. It merely crushed the life out of them with its talons and then discarded the bodies. It was not hunting for food.”

“I do not believe in coincidences,” stated General Ross. “I have to plan as if I have a dragon for an enemy. Get some sleep. We will talk more about this tomorrow.”

Chapter 34

Demands

General Pryblick and Colonel Dukirk rode side-by-side through the swamp, heading back the way they had come the day before. The general was in a foul mood, and the colonel was receiving the brunt of his rage.

“The men are at the point of mutiny,” berated the general, “and I can hardly blame them. They were stung and bitten the entire night, and most of them were afraid to even relieve themselves after the black-cloaks died. The tale of being eaten alive by those giant reptiles ran through the camp faster than the winds from a summer storm. This swamp is worse than the pits of hell, Colonel, and you are responsible for leading us into it. Give me one reason why you should not be stripped of your rank?”

“I was only doing the task assigned to me, General,” replied the colonel. “We could not proceed up the Coastal Highway. Even you agree with that. The bridge was out. How was I to know that the road through the swamp was flooded out?”

“You went on ahead of the column, Colonel,” scowled the general. “Did you not think to look beyond the area of the encampment?”

“I did go beyond it,” sighed the colonel, “but it was too late in the day to turn the column around. Look at the land around us, General. Where could we set up camp here? There is barely enough solid ground here to hold the road. At least back where we camped there was enough dry ground for the soldiers to settle down for the night. We could not do that on this road.”

“That was my decision to make, Colonel, not yours. Now we have lost two days. It will be impossible to reach Tagaret on schedule unless I march these men day and night. How effective do you think these men will be when the battle for Tagaret begins, Colonel?”

“All hope is not lost, General,” frowned the colonel. “Perhaps the answer to our dilemma resides in Danver Shores. The locals might know of a shorter route to Tagaret, and they may have horses that we can seize to transport the men faster, or perhaps even boats to ferry the men up the coast to make up for lost time.”

The colonel started sweating, and it was not entirely due to the heat and humidity of the swamp. He had not reported that all of the mage deaths were not natural. He had been afraid to, but the last

mage had been found in his tent, not on the banks of the channels. He sighed nervously. If he lost his rank, the colonel would be in for a rough time with the troops he used to command. They would relish the chance to exact revenge against him for slights imagined or real. He decided to gamble everything.

"All is not lost yet, General. I will find a way to get us to Tagaret on time. Have faith in me, and I will make this problem go away."

Less than a league ahead of the Federation column, the King of the Gypsies stood where the two bridges had been removed the night before. Moth landed on Adan's shoulder and reported the progress of the column. The gypsy nodded in acknowledgement as he watched the men under his command rush the preparations. He gazed at the long, horseshoe-shaped barricade that surrounded the bridge area and the catapults that had been dragged into position. Three-hundred men of the Melbin Guards were putting the finishing touches on the barricades and placing bundles of arrows at each position. The gypsy king nodded in appreciation.

"We will be ready for them, Moth," the gypsy said. "Do you need to rest, or would you like to return to the sky to keep watch over the enemy?"

"I will keep watch on them," the chubby fairy replied enthusiastically. "If they do not agree to your terms, I could deliver a myric quill to the general. Maybe his successor would be more agreeable."

Adan laughed at the feisty fairy. The tale of Moth's courageous attack had spread through the gypsy camp, and many of the gypsies were praising the little man's courage. "We will see how General Pryblick reacts soon enough, Moth, but I will keep your offer in mind. Would you like a boost?"

"No," the fairy responded. "I need the practice if I am to become a gypsy."

Moth flapped his wings and grunted, but he could not take off from a still position. With a sigh of resignation, he ran along Adan's shoulder and threw himself off. Adan smiled as he noticed that the stout fairy did not fall quite as far as usual before darting upward. The gypsy walked away from the bridge approach and walked to the barricade where one of the Melbin Guards was supervising the construction.

"We have less than an hour, Lomar," stated Adan. "Maybe less if they decide to send cavalry on ahead to hold the bridges. Will we be ready?"

"We are just about done," answered Lomar. "I am having the boats brought forward now. What about your wagons?"

"They are ready," assured the gypsy, "but I will not bring them

into view until I get a surrender from General Pryblick. Keep the boats out of view as well. Perhaps you can hide them behind the barricade until we need them."

"Done," agreed Lomar. "Do you think they will attack us?"

"They would be fools to do so," Adan answered after a moment's thought, "but they just might. I intend to inform the general of his precarious position, but the Federation generals are pretty used to getting their own way. If it comes to a fight, I will pull in the gypsies meant to escort the wagons. That will add a thousand men to our side."

"Thirteen-hundred against twenty-thousand," sighed Lomar. "Those are long odds for us."

"Not really," smiled Adan. "They cannot line up twenty-thousand men on that small spit of land, but we can line up thirteen hundred behind this barricade. They cannot possibly win, and I intend to convince them of that."

Lomar nodded and Adan walked away. The gypsy king moved away from the river to the staging area for the gypsy wagons that would be transporting the prisoners to the camps set up between Danver Shores and Melbin. Five-hundred gaily-painted gypsy wagons had been stripped inside to make room for the prisoners. The wagon drivers and the escorting warriors sat around in a makeshift camp doing what gypsies do best. They were trading stories and reciting tall tales, but there were no casks of ale this day. Adan had decreed that there would be no drinking until the victory celebration when all of the prisoners were in their prison camps. Adan stayed only long enough to inform Rax about the timing of the enemy's approach and left it to her to spread the word. As he made his way back towards the river, Moth landed on his shoulder in a controlled crash.

"Riders are coming up quick," reported the fairy. "There are thousands of them, and the general is among them."

Adan nodded as he pondered the reason for the sudden change of pace. He half expected a squad to arrive early to secure the bridges, but thousands of riders indicated something entirely different. The only thing he could think of was that the Federation had thought of a way to get to Tagaret that Adan had not considered.

"I think they have had enough of the stinging flies and mosquitoes," commented Moth. "They are especially bad this morning. The whole column is trying to swat the things and walk at the same time. It is rather funny to watch."

Adan chuckled and picked up the pace. He hurried to the bridge area and waited for the enemy to arrive.

Only minutes away from the river, General Pryblick frowned as the vanguard slowed to a halt. He looked at Colonel Dukirk beside

him and nodded towards the vanguard.

"Go see what the problem is," demanded the general.

The colonel nodded and rode forward. When he reached the lead riders, he did not have to ask why they had stopped. He gazed at the fortifications on the other side of the river and swallowed hard. Seeing the lack of bridges across the river, Colonel Dukirk immediately knew that the Alceans had tricked them into the swamp. He shook his head with fear as he pondered how the general would take the news. With anxious resignation, the colonel turned his horse and rode back to the general.

"I think you need to go forward and see this for yourself," the colonel reported cryptically. "My words would do the situation no justice."

"Don't play games with me, Colonel," snapped General Pryblick. "I am not in the mood for it. Why have we stopped?"

"We have stopped, General," answered the colonel, "because we cannot proceed. The bridges have vanished."

"Nonsense," spat the general as he guided his horse out of the column. "We will talk about this later, Dukirk, but you will not enjoy what I have to say."

General Pryblick rode to the front of the column and gaped at the sight before him. At first he could not believe what he was seeing. The bridges were gone and the fortifications were new. They had not been there the day before when they had entered the swamp. He was sure of that. He gazed at the catapults aimed towards him and shook his head. Eventually, his eyes focused on the lone man standing at the far edge of the river. He frowned in confusion. The man wore no uniform. In fact, he was dressed garishly for a fighting man, yet there he stood, obviously waiting to speak to someone. General Pryblick rode forward and the column followed him. The general halted right at the edge of the river and stared at the man across from him.

"Welcome to Alcea, General Pryblick," Adan called out in a friendly tone. "Shall we talk?"

"Who are you?" the general called back. "And what do we have to talk about?"

"I am called Adan," answered the gypsy, "and I am authorized by King Arik of Alcea to accept your surrender. Now, we can shout across the river, or we can meet in the middle of it. Which would please you more?"

The gypsy signaled the men behind him, and a boat was dragged to the river's edge. The general stared at the gypsy and considered his options. Wanting a closer look at the fortifications, he decided to accept the invitation.

"I do not care much for floating in boats," shouted the general,

“but if you will guarantee my safety and return me to this shore, I will meet with you where you stand.”

“Agreed,” shouted Adan as he waved for two men to row over and fetch the general.

While the boat was being rowed across the river, the general ordered one of his men to fetch Colonel Dukirk. The man left and returned with the colonel just as the boat reached the shore.

“You are coming with me, Colonel,” ordered the general. “You will see first hand what your foolish actions have brought to us.”

The two officers dismounted and entered the boat. The gypsy made no protest over the addition of the colonel. In fact, he smiled broadly. That smile worried the general more than anything else, and he began to wonder if he was being a fool for trusting the man to honor a truce. Of course, it was too late to alter the terms of the meeting as the boat was already under way. The general gritted his teeth and endured the ride. When they reached the shore, the two Federation officers walked up to Adan.

“This is Colonel Dukirk,” announced the general. “I didn’t think you would mind his coming.”

“Certainly not,” smiled Adan. “Hello again, Dukirk.”

The colonel’s face paled and the general gasped.

“You two have met before?”

“I met Adan in Danver Shores last fall,” admitted the colonel. “He claimed to be a smuggler who took goods through the swamp. That is why I felt confident that the road went through.”

“It used to years ago,” stated Adan, “but no longer. Your men are on an island in the swamp, General. Fortunately, King Arik is desirous of capturing your men rather than killing them. He has authorized me to accept your surrender and transport your men to camps where they will be fed and taken care of until the end of hostilities. Will you accept?”

General Pryblick looked around, examining the barricade and estimating the number of men manning it. He turned back to Adan with a scowl on his face.

“You can’t be serious. I see a couple of hundred men and nothing more. You expect me to surrender twenty-thousand fighting men to you? I will make you a counteroffer. Fix one of the bridges so my men can easily cross the river, and I will make you a very wealthy man. Perhaps I can arrange for you to rule over a portion of Alcea after it is conquered.”

“I already rule over what I wish to,” replied Adan, “and the Federation will never rule any of Alcea.”

“You are mistaken in that belief,” retorted the general, “but I will not belabor the point. The fact is that you are faced with

overwhelming odds. You cannot expect a surrender, so you are just wasting time. There is nothing else to talk about."

"Overwhelming odds?" countered the gypsy. "Perhaps you do not fully understand your predicament, General. I may only have three-hundred men manning this barricade, but that is not the total of my resources. I have more than enough men to man this position all day and all night for however long it takes for you to surrender. Your men are not going anywhere, General. They cannot walk their way out of the swamp. They cannot swim out. The only exit is right were you stand, and your men will be cut down as they try to escape."

"So you say," retorted the general. "You told Colonel Dukirk that you smuggled goods through the swamp, which was a lie. Why should I believe your words now?"

"I did not lie to Dukirk," smiled Adan. "I often smuggled things along the road through the swamp, but not since the end of the Darkness. When the Darkness cleared, the rains returned to the land. The swamp has been impassable ever since."

Adan sighed as the general turned towards the boat.

"General," Adan called after him, "think about the welfare of your men. You had roaring fires last night, but you used up practically all of the wood available to you. There will be no more campfires, and there will be no food. Your men will be prey to stinging flies and mosquitoes until they are too sick to care. And then the reptiles will feast upon their bodies. Their deaths will be a slow, painful process. Why put your men through that when we are offering safety, food, and shelter?"

The general spun around and faced Adan. "What would you know about our fires?" he asked. "We were leagues away from this place."

"Just who do you think killed your mages?" asked Adan.

The general opened his mouth to retort that the mages died of natural deaths, but he caught himself before he spoke. The very fact that Adan knew about the deaths led credence to his boast of killing the black-cloaks. The general shut his mouth and glared at the colonel.

"I believe it to be true," the colonel said softly. "I said nothing because I could not be sure, but the last of the mages died inside his tent."

"You sicken me, Dukirk," scowled the general. "You are relieved of your rank."

The colonel merely nodded, and the general fell silent. He dwelled upon his predicament, but he saw no hope of survival. While the army could survive for a while by eating their horses, they would not even be able to cook the meat without firewood. With a heavy sigh, he turned to face Adan.

"Who are you that you are authorized to accept my surrender?"

the general asked. “You wear no uniform.”

“I am Adan, King of the Gypsies. As for my lack of a uniform, this is my Alcea that you are invading. Did you think that only our soldiers would fight your armies? Nay, General. Every able bodied man and woman will stand against the Federation. Many of your peers have already been defeated. Gattas, Montero, and Franz are dead. Ruppert, Hanold, and Somma have surrendered. Testa, Alden, Nunes, Butwin, Ross, and Haggerty are imprisoned. We Alceans have been waiting a long time for your armies to arrive, General. We have plans to defeat every one of them. Be thankful that your lot in this war was one of surrender rather than death. Some of your brethren were not given the chance to make such a choice.”

The general remained silent and pensive. Adan could almost figure out what was going through the man’s mind.

“We know about all twelve teams, General,” Adan said softly. “We have been monitoring the portals for over a year now. We know the location of every secret cache in Alcea, and all of them have been emptied. Every one of the remaining Federation armies is already reduced to foraging, and we are making such foraging a deadly endeavor. So, if you are thinking that you are letting Fortella and Bledsoe down, think again. Neither of their teams will reach Tagaret.”

General Pryblick nodded sadly. Letting his fellow generals down had been exactly what he was pondering, and the Alcean knew far too much to be bluffing. If what Adan had said was true, and the general was ready to accept that it was, the Alceans knew about the portals before he did. That meant that the invasion was sabotaged at the highest levels of the Federation. It was meant to fail from the very beginning. He fumed silently, but he accept his fate.

“How will you extract my men from the swamp?” the general asked.

“We have four boats available,” answered Adan. “We will draw off forty men at a time and lead them to wagons to be transported to the camps. There they will be fed and checked by local healers. When the war is over, they will be repatriated to Zara. No harm will come to them unless they demand it by trying to revolt or escape. Your instructions to the men would be helpful in that regard, General. We truly do not want to harm your men.”

“And our horses?” asked General Pryblick. “Surely you are not thinking of ferrying them by boat?”

“Certainly not,” grinned Adan. “I am a gypsy. I would never harm a horse. After your men are completely evacuated, my men will restore the bridges and lead the horses to safety. The gypsies will welcome them as new additions to the herd.”

Despite the tenseness of the situation, General Pryblick actually

laughed. “If nothing else you said was true, you are no doubt a gypsy.”

“All of my words were true, General,” smiled Adan. “I will ask that you instruct your men to abandon their weapons on the island before entering the boats. That is a requirement, not a request.”

General Pryblick nodded. “Have me taken back to my men. I will prepare them for the evacuation.”

* * * *

Lord Kommoron entered the sitting room at his palatial estate in the Sanctum. He stared at his guest with more than a hint of annoyance.

“Why have you come here?” Lord Kommoron scowled.

“We have had an urgent message from King Harowin of Ertak,” answered Grand General Kyrga. “I took the message to Emperor Jaar, but he saw no need to act upon it. I thought you should be informed immediately.”

“You were told to work under Emperor Jaar,” retorted Lord Kommoron. “What is the urgent message?”

“Two of King Harowin’s sons have been assassinated,” reported the Grand General. “He is demanding that General Montero be returned to Ertak immediately.”

“Demanding?” shouted the noble. “Who does he think he is to be demanding anything? Does he not know that we are in the midst of a war? Is he so afraid that the Alceans will hurt his precious heir? What nonsense is this that you disturb me with?”

“You misunderstand, Master,” cowered the Grand General. “King Harowin is not afraid for Montero’s life. The king believes that the general is responsible for the assassinations. In fact, he captured the assassins and interrogated them. They all agreed that they were working under General Montero’s express orders. The king wants his revenge, and he wants it now. King Harowin is threatening to leave the Federation if his demand is denied.”

Lord Kommoron glared at Kyrga, but he turned away from the Grand General before he spoke. Lord Kommoron had the troops necessary in Farmin to force Ertak to rethink its position, but to have Ertak even thinking about pulling out of the Federation was dangerous at this stage of the game. If he used his new armies to crush King Harowin, the other petty monarchs would sit up and take notice. Now was not the time for that to happen. While the noble was thinking about his options, the door opened and a servant entered unbidden. The man approached the noble and whispered something in his ear. Lord Kommoron glanced briefly at the Grand General before wordlessly leaving the room.

The noble made his way to a special room of the mansion. He

entered the room and quickly closed the door behind him. He turned around and stared questioningly at the demonkin standing before him.

"I received a message from Tagaret," explained K'san. "I felt it urgent enough to disturb you."

"What is the message?" asked the noble.

"The Alceans knew that the attacks were coming," replied the demonkin, "even before the use of the portals was complete, and they did not seem overly concerned as they should."

"Where have you gotten this information?"

"By way of Artimor," answered K'san. "He sent a human to me with the information. He says that you have a spy in the upper echelons of the Federation, one who was capable of sharing the locations of the portals and the timing for the attacks. He further suggests that you use the portals to send additional armies to Alcea, armies that will not be expected."

Lord Kommoron nodded. "Do you believe Artimor's words and agree with his thoughts?"

"The Claw of Alutar has powers far beyond my own," the demonkin conceded. "I must put faith in his words."

Lord Kommoron nodded. "The message has been delivered. Return to your world, but be aware that this portal may not be available for a while. I have need to move it to the palace."

The demonkin bowed slightly and departed through the portal. Lord Kommoron turned and left the special room. He returned to the sitting room where Grand General Kyrga waited.

"Send a message to Camp Destiny," instructed the noble. "Tell General Tauman to relieve General Montero of his command. Montero is to be brought back under guard. Tauman can appoint one of his own colonels to take Montero's place, or he may promote one of Montero's colonels. I will leave that up to Tauman. Additionally, I want Tauman's 1st Corps readied for war."

"Readied for war?" gasped the Grand General. "In Zara or Alcea?"

"Alcea," answered the noble. "I want from you a list of every person who had intricate knowledge of the locations of our portals in Alcea."

The Grand General opened his mouth to answer the question, but Lord Kommoron held up his hand to belay the answer.

"I do not want an impromptu answer. I want a definitive one. Think hard before you submit the list. Lives will depend upon it."

Chapter 35

Uses of Magic

Six unicorns flew over the Coastal Highway north of Tagaret. When they were about halfway to Miram, they slowly descended and landed on the Coastal Highway. Within minutes Alcean Rangers greeted them. The black-suited warriors bowed to the king and queen.

"Where is Colonel Vidson?" asked King Arik.

"He is meeting with Colonel Jaynes on the hill to your right," answered the Ranger. "I will have you escorted to him."

The king nodded and one of the Rangers ran into the woods and returned mounted on a horse. He silently beckoned the king and his party to follow him. Alex and Jenneva passed the king and queen to follow the Ranger, leaving Theos and Balamor behind the royal couple. The Ranger led the small group through the forest and up a trail to a small makeshift camp just shy of the summit of the hill. Colonel Mitar Vidson, the head of the Rangers, stood waiting for them as if he had been expecting them. The colonel bowed to the king and queen.

"David will be with us in a moment," stated Mitar. "We were just discussing the last fairy report out of Tagaret."

"We were promised six-thousand Alcean soldiers," quipped Colonel David Jaynes as he walked out of the trees. David was the head of the Red Swords, and he promptly bowed to the king and queen. "Now I understand that we are just getting the six of you. I guess we got lucky." David grinned broadly and winked at Alex.

Both David and Mitar had known Alex since the day he first joined the army in the reign of King Eugene. They had been among the men that had accompanied Alex on a deadly mission into the northlands to spy on the goblin armies, and their lasting friendship had been forged in those frozen lands.

"Tell us about Team Miram," suggested Alex. "What are we up against?"

"We have a wily opponent," replied Mitar. "While the other teams in Alcea are commanded by a single general, Team Miram is not. Bledsoe has allowed General Kozinski to retain command and control of the 17th Corps, although Bledsoe has the ultimate authority. This allows the 7th Corps and the 17th Corps to work independently or together depending on what the situation calls for."

"And they have been clever in using that capability," added

David. “For example, to get around the problem of us attacking the foragers, the two armies now split just before setting up camp. Both armies leave the road on opposite sides, and they converge at the campsite. This traps a fair amount of game between the two armies while not allowing us the opportunity to pick off stray foragers.”

“Clever,” conceded Alex. “What about the black-cloaks?”

“We were ordered not to enter the camp to kill them,” frowned Mitar. “I think that decision might come back to haunt us. The black-cloaks have been making night flights. I suspect that they might be visiting other teams. If so, they will now be especially wary about assassination attempts. Our window of opportunity may have been closed.”

“The black-cloaks have not visited Team Danver Shores,” interjected the queen. “Adan reported that their black-cloaks all perished last night. I am sure the gypsies would have noticed if there were visitors.”

“That still leaves Team Mya,” frowned the king. “My order may have been a poor one in retrospect, but I was not willing to sacrifice my best people to eliminate the black-cloaks.”

“We will find another way to remove the black-cloak threat,” declared Queen Tanya. “Where is Team Miram now?”

Mitar waved the group towards the top of the hill. Just before the crest was a small dugout and Mitar waved for the others to enter.

“It is too small for all of us,” stated Mitar, “but David and I have seen enough for now.”

Balamor decided not to enter, and so did Jenneva and Theos, allowing Alex, Arik, and Tanya to occupy the dugout. Alex immediately reached into his pack and removed the elven scope that had been given to him by Galdan many years ago. He raised the scope to his eye and gazed at the approaching armies. After a minute, he passed the scope to the king and exited the dugout. Several minutes later, Arik and Tanya exited the dugout and Tanya returned the scope to her father.

“The armies are not totally segregated,” Alex stated. “The eight black-cloaks ride together.”

“Between the two armies,” nodded David.

“What do they do when the armies split?” asked Alex.

“They become the tail end of the 7th Corps,” answered Mitar. “What are you thinking?”

“I am thinking that they need to die,” answered Alex. “Can you estimate where the armies will split?”

“I think so,” answered Mitar, “but they have only pulled that maneuver twice so far. How precise an estimate do you need?”

“Bow range,” answered Alex.

“They will have physical shields up, Alex,” frowned Jenneva. “They would be fools not to.”

“I agree,” interjected Theos. “They might not bother with physical shields in the middle of twenty-thousand men, but I would almost bet that they erect them when they become exposed like you are talking about.”

“Alright,” mused Alex, “but it is an opportunity nonetheless. We will have all eight of them together, and there will not be a whole host of soldiers in the way. And we have three battle mages of our own. We should be able to develop a plan to eliminate them.”

“And get away alive?” frowned David. “Once you attack the black-cloaks, both armies will move to converge on your position. Mitar and I will not be able to get all of our men in close enough to support the mages without being detected and spoiling your surprise.”

“Then we need a diversion,” grinned Alex. “A diversion that is sure to capture the attention of both armies.”

“I’ve seen that look in your eyes before, Father,” stated the queen. “What are you planning?”

“Let me see the terrain before I speak,” Alex replied. “Mitar, will you take me there?”

“Just you?” asked Mitar.

“Just me and Bitsy,” nodded Alex. “The fairy will record the terrain for the others to inspect. While I am gone, our battle mages can discuss what spells might be necessary to get around the shields of the black-cloaks.”

Mitar nodded and started down the hill. Alex walked up to the king and spoke softly to him before following the Ranger. The king nodded and woke Prince Midge.

“What is he up to, Mother?” asked the queen.

“He will tell us when he is ready,” Jenneva replied. “Let’s talk about the black-cloaks. I was thinking that tree mines could come in handy. The thousands of projectiles they create will wreak havoc on physical shields. I can’t think of anything that will weaken shields quicker.”

“I am not familiar with that spell,” frowned Theos. “I will have to leave that to you and Balamor.”

“Balamor will not be using offensive magic,” Jenneva responded. “He is not a battle mage. He is an illusionist.”

“I have been known to dabble with other tricks,” Balamor quipped, “but I will not take umbrage at your words.”

“But Alex said that we would have three battle mages,” frowned the Tyronian mage. “Who is the third?”

Jenneva glanced at Tanya and giggled. “Have you been hiding your talents again, Daughter?”

“I know some magic,” the queen said with a smile.

“But you are called the Warrior Queen,” Theos replied with confusion. “Is that just a title to match the Warrior King?”

“She is handy with a sword, too,” chuckled Jenneva. “I guess she picked up a little from both her father and me. Anyway, Theos, I can teach you the spell rather quickly. It is not complicated.”

“I would appreciate that, Jenneva,” the Tyronian mage responded.

“I will be going with you,” stated Balamor. “If nothing else, I can provide shields for you while you attack the black-cloaks.”

“Excellent,” smiled Jenneva. “Let’s find a place to sit and discuss this.”

* * * *

General Bledsoe of the 7th Corps of the Empire of Barouk looked up as a shadow suddenly darkened the woods. He gasped when he saw the massive creature diving out of the sky straight for him.

“A dragon!” shouted one of the soldiers. “Take cover!”

The soldiers in the vanguard scattered, seeking whatever cover they could find. Some cavalrymen leaped off their horses to seek shelter, while others spurred their horses in their haste to flee. Chaos reigned all around him, but General Bledsoe pulled his sword defiantly and raised it high over his head. He need not have bothered. The dragon ended its dive level with the treetops and soared over the column, heading from the vanguard to the tail. General Bledsoe frowned at the attack. He had never seen a dragon before, but he could have sworn that he heard it cackle as it flew overhead.

The chaos that had started in the vanguard spread throughout the column as the dragon flew just above it, tongues of flame shooting from its mouth and tendrils of smoke wafting out of its nostrils. Like a rolling boulder parting the tall grass as it rolls down a steep slope, the dragon parted the column of soldiers and sent the men scurrying for safety. At the very rear of the column were eight black-cloaks, and while they had never seen a dragon either, they did not scurry and hide. While the warriors’ weapons might have no effect on such a beast, their magic was not as limited in range or effect. The lead mage shouted orders to the others, and magical projectiles shot upwards towards the dragon.

The display of battle magic further convinced the soldiers to seek cover, and the black-cloaks stood alone, defiant to the flying threat. The first round of magical projectiles had no effect on the dragon as it swerved at the last minute and avoided them, almost as if the creature had expected the attack.

Behind the black-cloaks, the air shimmered. What had appeared to be a large thorny bush suddenly disappeared, revealing four

humans standing in a diamond formation. Jenneva, being the point of the diamond closest to the black-cloaks, sent the first offensive spell at the Zaran mages. Sheets of flames dissipated upon striking their invisible shields. She had not expected to find the enemy unprotected, but the battle would have ended immediately if they had been. It had been an appropriate choice for the opening salvo.

The black-cloaks whirled around to face their opponents, secure in the knowledge that they were well shielded. Tanya and Theos, who were flanking Jenneva, let loose with tree mines. The spells flew into two trees near the black-cloaks and exploded. The trunks of the trees disappeared in a mist, thousands of jagged wooden shards flying outwards with explosive force. The shields of the black-cloaks lit up like a swarm of a thousand fireflies as the wooden projectiles slammed into them. The soldiers nearest the mages screamed out in agony as the flying splinters pierced their bodies, but the black-cloaks were unhurt. The Zaran mages immediately attacked with a variety of spells. Fireballs dissipated upon impact with Balamor's shield, while lightning bolts illuminated the shields with a dazzling display of raw energy.

The tops of the trees, whose trunks had been blown apart, came smashing down to the ground, one of them rebounding off the shields of the black-cloaks before crashing to the ground. More soldiers screamed in pain as they were caught under the falling trees, but other soldiers nocked arrows and fired at the Alceans. Jenneva joined Tanya and Theos with another set of tree mines. They aimed behind the black-cloaks to discourage the archers while also weakening the physical shield protecting the mages. Three more trees exploded in a thick mist. Again the Zaran shields lit up from the impact of the projectiles, and Tanya nodded to herself as if she just noticed something important.

"They are moving apart," Theos warned as he saw the black-cloaks spreading out.

"Tanya," Jenneva said with a sense of urgency.

"I'm on it, Mother," the queen replied. "Shake them up. Theos, target the second from the right. He is holding the physical shield."

The black-cloaks sent another salvo of assorted spells as they started to separate into two groups and move away from each other, but Balamor's shields held firm. As the black-cloaks tried to spread farther apart, they ran into invisible walls halting their progress. Tanya smiled knowingly. Theos concentrated on creating a small whirlwind. The tiny cyclone grew in intensity. As the winds picked up dirt, twigs, rocks, and other debris, the whirlwind grew in size, millions of physical particles twirling around at dazzling speeds. As Theos was directing the tornado towards his chosen target, the ground

rumbled and shook. The trees started swaying and soldiers began to lose their balance. The black-cloaks also had trouble standing, and their attack halted momentarily as they tried to secure their footing and understand what was happening.

Theos's tornado roared as it came up against the physical shield protecting the black-cloaks. Tanya watched it with interest as she held her hands far apart. She appeared to be trying to bring her hands together, but something was stopping her from doing so. Jenneva concentrated on the ground. The rumbling increased, and the ground began to ripple in waves flowing away from the Alcean diamond. Trees creaked loudly and began to fall. The black-cloaks tried one more salvo of offensive spells before giving up and concentrating on strengthening their shields.

"Keep it up, Theos," Jenneva said. "You are wearing through the shields."

Theos nodded and started moving the tornado around to the side of the enemy mages. Tanya twitched.

"No," Tanya said quickly. "Not the side. Attack only from the front. I am holding physical shields to both sides of them."

Theos raised an eyebrow as he glanced at the queen, but he promptly obeyed. He directed the tornado back to the front and grunted as he forced more energy in to the spell.

"To stop them from spreading apart?" Theos asked.

"Sort of," Tanya replied. "Just weaken their shields and hurry up about it."

The ground shook violently, and dozens of great trees toppled to the ground. The black-cloaks stumbled, and Tanya's arms moved rapidly together until both arms were straight out before her.

"Hit them with fire, Theos," Tanya shouted in a strained voice.

Theos watched as the black-cloaks stumbled and then they all suddenly flew towards one another until they were stacked like a season's supply of wood. That was when Tanya shouted for fire. Theos did not hesitate. He dropped the spell controlling the tornado and sent sheets of flames towards the black-cloaks. The Zaran battle mages screamed in agony as the flames devoured their bodies.

"Time to go," Jenneva stated. "Balamor, cover our retreat."

The mage from Pog nodded and cast an illusion before dropping his shields. Anyone looking towards the Alcean diamond would see nothing but the large thorn bush. They would not see the four unicorns come out of hiding to carry away the Alcean mages. Moments later the four mages returned to the camp of the Rangers. Alex and Arik were waiting anxiously for them. Alex and Jenneva left the camp in one direction while the king and queen left in another, leaving Theos and Balamor alone.

“What happened back there?” Theos asked Balamor. “Was Jenneva trembling the ground?”

“She was,” nodded Balamor. “She is quite effective with that spell.”

“Quite effective?” echoed Theos. “She brought down the forest. I cannot begin to imagine what power that must take. How did she manage to stack the black-cloaks?”

“That was Tanya’s doing,” answered Balamor.

“Tanya?” frowned Theos. “She was merely holding physical shields to keep the enemy from fleeing. It is a rather curious use for a shielding spell, but it certainly stopped them from splitting up. Why do you say that the stacking was Tanya’s doing? Did she abandon the shields?”

“No,” Balamor replied. “She merely brought the two shields closer together.”

“What?” Theos asked. “That is impossible. You can’t use shields as offensive spells, and you can’t drag them across the ground. If you want them moved, you need to recast them. You can’t just move them.”

Balamor smiled at the Tyronian mage. “Obviously, the queen can. She used those physical shields as a vice to crush the black-cloaks. I would say it was a novel and effective use of the spell.”

“I would call it more incredible than anything else,” Theos said with awe. “I cannot imagine the power that must take. I thought the queen only knew a little magic?”

“The queen is modest,” chuckled Balamor. “I often wonder who is stronger, Jenneva or Tanya, but I think that is a question that will never be answered. I have never known them to use the same spells as each other during a battle, as if that would invite a comparison of their powers.”

* * * *

General Tauman and Colonel Dorfan stood near portal seventeen in Camp Destiny. Nearby was a company of cavalry from the 1st Corps of the Empire of Barouk.

“Do not approach this assignment casually, Dorfan,” warned General Tauman. “General Montero is a very popular general. If his troops get the idea that you are there to arrest him, a company of cavalry will not save your life. You will have to use deceit to snare him. Perhaps you can tell him that King Harowin has died, and he is needed to assume the throne immediately.”

“He only has three more days in Alcea,” noted Colonel Dorfan. “He will not be anxious to return home before the war is won even if the crown awaits him.”

General Tauman pressed his lips together in thought and nodded.

“I think you are correct. What will get him home is if he thinks someone else is seizing the throne while he is away. He will feel compelled to hurry home and set things right.”

“I will try that,” agreed the colonel. “Is Prince Lyker or Prince Lindmyr the eldest?”

“The next in line after Montero is Harold,” stated the general, “but Harold is a sickly boy. Montero would never believe that story. I believe Lyker comes next. If I am wrong and he wants to know why Lindmyr isn’t seizing the throne, tell him that Lindmyr is dead.” The general sighed and shook his head. “Look, Dorfan, I don’t need to tell you how to lie. You’ve been doing it just fine for years. Just make sure that Montero is sent back here. This portal opens in Pontek. There should be no Alcean opposition after Montero has passed through. Between him and Gattas they will have killed anyone they came across, but play it safe anyway. You will be in hostile territory. Good luck.”

“Thank you, General,” replied Colonel Dorfan.

The colonel signaled the captain of the company accompanying him to Alcea. The captain addressed his men and sent a squad towards the portal. That squad was to secure the other side of the portal for the rest of the company. The squad leader approached the portal and started to open the door. Unexpectedly, the squad leader was thrown back as the door sprung open. Water started surging through the door with such pressure that a wall of water shot over three paces before touching the ground. The squad waiting to go through the door was immediately caught by the flash flood. Their legs were swept out beneath them and they tumbled in the surf as the water plowed up the dirt and spread out.

“Shut that door!” shouted General Tauman. “Shut it now!”

The company of soldiers raced to obey the general’s orders, but the flow of water made it impossible to approach the door directly. Some of the men ran around the rapidly spreading flood to approach the door from behind, but they could not budge the door. The flow was too strong.

“It’s like trying to walk up a sewer in a storm,” shouted one of the men. “It can’t be done.”

General Tauman looked at the rapidly building flood with dismay. He sniffed the air and frowned deeply. He turned to Colonel Dorfan and said, “Get on your horse, and go get some mages. Be quick about it and send as many mages as you can find.”

“Won’t it eventually just stop?” asked the colonel.

“When the valley is full it might stop,” snapped the general. “That is seawater coming through the door. Wherever the other half of that portal is, it is underwater, and I don’t think this valley is large enough

to hold the entire ocean."

The colonel swallowed hard and raced for his horse. The general turned his attention back to the portal and the futility of his men trying to close the door. He shouted for them to retreat and then mounted his own horse as the waters reached his boots and began to rise. A thousand thoughts went through the general's mind as he waited for the mages to arrive, but none of them could explain why seawater would be flowing through the portal. Portal seventeen led directly to an inn in Pontek, and while Pontek was a coastal city, the inn was not near the shoreline. For this much seawater to be flowing through the portal, the whole city of Pontek would have to be underwater. That would indicate a flood of massive proportions, and General Tauman thought that was too much of a coincidence to be a viable answer to his question.

The mages finally arrived and began casting spells to hold the water back so they could close the door. General Tauman appeared to be watching, but his eyes were unfocused, his mind still pondering why the water was coming through. When the mages were finally done and the door was closed again, the general waved them to him. They promptly complied.

"Can you do that again?" asked the general.

"With a short rest," replied one of the black-cloaks.

"You will have a ride of three leagues to rest," stated the general. "We are going to portal eighteen to see if it also floods."

"You think the other portal will also flood?" inquired the black-cloak.

"I hope not," answered the general, "but I have a sinking feeling that it will. If water does come out of it, we will need to check every portal in the valley."

"You think the whole country of Alcea has sunk beneath the waves?" gasped the black-cloak.

"I do not know what to think," sighed General Tauman. "None of this makes sense, but I know where this portal comes out, and I cannot imagine a flood of such significance to cause what is happening here. Portal eighteen comes out in a barn near Barouk that is well above sea level. If we can open that door, one of you can go through and travel to Pontek to find out what is wrong with this portal."

Chapter 36

Day Eleven

General Bledsoe and General Kozinski bent over the map in the large command tent of Team Miram. The Spinoan general sighed and shook his head.

“There is little alternative to our route,” General Kozinski said, his voice showing his weariness. “We have been looking at these maps since we made camp and dawn is only hours away. Nothing is going to change the fact that we have to proceed along the Coastal Highway. There is no other option.”

“There are always options,” retorted General Bledsoe. “Retreat to Miram is one of them, although I am not proposing such a thing. We could also fortify this position and dare the Alceans to attack us, or we could leave the road and proceed overland to meet up with Team Mya.”

“I am not sure that we could meet up with Fortella before he attacks Tagaret,” frowned General Kozinski. “Our armies would be slowed going overland, and Team Mya’s approach is perpendicular to our own. We would be fortunate to meet up with them on the morning of the thirteenth day, which would buy us nothing in the end. Your thought about fortifying our current position intrigues me, though. How can we do that and still arrive in Tagaret on time?”

“I cannot believe that we are facing the full strength of the Alcean army,” explained the Baroukan general, “but this works just as well if we are. If we halt and fortify, that leaves our enemy two choices. They can either show themselves and attack us, or leave the area to intercept Fortella or Pryblick. If they decide to attack us, we will not only have numerical superiority, but we will also have our fortifications. We could conceivably destroy the Alcean army right here.”

“And if they decide not to attack?” asked General Kozinski.

“They will retreat to intercept one of the other teams. That would leave us the option of breaking camp and starting a forced march towards Tagaret to make up for lost time.”

“We would have to know what the enemy is doing for that to work,” countered General Kozinski. “With the loss of our black-cloaks, we no longer have the ability to spy on the enemy. If we guess wrong, we either end up missing the war or engaging the enemy in the middle of a forced march. How do you propose to spy on them

without the mages?"

General Bledsoe sighed and nodded. "That is the problem. They have obviously been fairly successful spying on us. That mage attack yesterday was timed perfectly. It was the only time of the entire day when they could have possibly gotten close to the black-cloaks. Whoever is leading our opposition, he is clever. I will give him credit for that."

"How bad were our losses?" asked General Kozinski. "Have you been informed yet?"

General Bledsoe nodded. "Besides the black-cloaks, we lost around fifty men, but we also have three-hundred badly wounded, and no mages to heal them. Unless we fortify and stay put, we will have to leave them behind."

General Kozinski grimaced. "And they did that with only four mages?"

"That is what has been reported. There was also a dragon, but it caused no damage. It did cause a great deal of panic, and that troubles me. Did the Alcean mages attack when the dragon caused a convenient distraction, or was the dragon causing a distraction so that the Alcean mages could attack?"

General Kozinski gasped. "Could the Alceans actually control a dragon? Is that what you are saying?"

"It makes no sense, I admit, but I am not a big believer in coincidences, and that was a rather large coincidence. There is a lot to be said for knowing your enemy, and we do not know ours. That is a flaw that I intend to take up with Grand General Kyrga when we return to Despair. His demand for secrecy has hurt us a great deal already, and this war is far from over. The Federation must never make such a mistake again."

"There will be time for dealing with that later," General Kozinski said dismissively, "and I would like to get some sleep before morning. What is wrong with continuing along the road to Tagaret the way we have been?"

"I do not like doing what the enemy expects," answered General Bledsoe, "but you are correct in assuming that that option remains on the table. If we do continue onward, I would expect an ambush today or tomorrow."

"How many men can they have out there?" frowned the Spinoan general. "They are only supposed to have ten-thousand men in all of Targa."

"The black-cloaks reported seeing at least one-thousand men yesterday," answered the Baroukan general, "but they reported that the enemy was trying to remain hidden." General Bledsoe sighed wearily. "The truth is, we don't have any idea what we are up against.

Let's get some sleep. I will make the decision in the morning."

* * * *

Dawn was still two hours away, but the Lanoirian army camp was starting to stir as soldiers rose and prepared for another day of forced march.

"These men will be worthless when we finally face General Kolling's armies," complained General Za-hong. "We must find a way to transport them."

"The boats will not be back from transporting the prisoners in time to ferry the men," replied Bin-lu. "There is nothing we can do."

"There is something we can do," offered Rut-ki. We can slow down Kolling's armies more than we are. That will give our own men some time to refresh before battle."

"How do you plan to do that?" frowned Bin-lu. "Elandros is already doing all that he can. He only has one-hundred elves."

"We have the five-thousand men from Chi already on their way towards General Kolling," answered Rut-ki. "I can use them to stall the Federation march towards Ongchi."

"That might work," Bin-lu replied optimistically.

"And it might not," warned General Za-hong as he glanced around the tent to make sure that no one was listening. "I would not be caught saying this in front of the men, but our Lanoirian soldiers are not well-trained warriors. While we might now equal the size of the Federation armies that we are up against, I would not expect our men to hold their own against a well-seasoned enemy such as the Federation. We need another one of your traps, Bin-lu."

"I have no more tricks," frowned Bin-lu. "Perhaps we had best head to Ongchi and prepare to defend the city walls."

"I thought we had decided to avoid a long siege of Ongchi?" retorted Rut-ki. "If we allow General Kolling to lock our army inside the city walls, he will have control over the rest of the country. We will not be able to stop him from raiding and destroying anything he wants. We need to either force Kolling to surrender or destroy his army. Let me take our captive generals to meet with Kolling. Even if he doesn't agree to surrender, the meeting will slow his armies down for another couple of hours, maybe even half a day."

"I see no harm in that," nodded General Za-hong, "but I doubt that he will surrender."

"Then Colonel Wu-sang and I will use his five-thousand men from Chi to attack the rear of the Federation column," replied Rut-ki. "They should be getting close to the Federation armies by now. That will buy more time for you to get the rest of our army in place."

"This might work," Bin-lu said optimistically. "We may not have enough boats to transport the entire army, but we can transport some

of them. What if we used boats just to move portions of our army a couple of hours closer to Ongchi? If we could run the boats day and night, we might shave half a day off our march, and Rut-ki can buy us another half day between her negotiations and harassing. That will allow us to position our forces between Kolling and Ongchi, and we will still have the ability to fall back inside the city walls if things do not go well."

"That plan is far better than what we face now," agreed General Za-hong. "Let me send a fairy to Ongchi. I will have Za-chan send every available boat towards us, no matter how small."

* * * *

Hendy Valley was three-day's march south of Trekum, and the place held special significance for Captain Orteka, leader of the Kadin Claws Mercenary Company. As he waited for dawn to arrive, his hand subconsciously rose to his right cheek and felt the long thin scar there. There was a similar scar on his left cheek, and both of them had been inflicted in Hendy Valley years ago. The mercenary had been assigned to spy on the approaching Lanoirian army under Emperor Hanchi, and he had been captured and beaten. He was mutilated and sent back to General Mobami with a message to flee before the might of the Lanoirian army. It had been an experience that Captain Orteka had never forgotten.

"Put it behind you," Captain Azule said softly as he approached. "That was a different time and a different war."

Captain Orteka turned and nodded to the leader of the Sarga Mercenary Company. "I have never been back to this valley since that night. I should have died that night instead of being set free. The gods smiled on me." Captain Orteka gazed up at the night sky and sighed. "Do you think the gods have changed their minds and summoned me back to make things right? Why else would I once again find myself at the mouth of this very valley facing an army of overwhelming size?"

"Perhaps because one must pass through this valley to get from Gortha to Trekum," smiled Captain Azule. "It is the path that armies march. Besides, this Federation army is only a fifth of what Emperor Hanchi had behind him."

"It still far outnumbers us," frowned Captain Orteka. "With the Sordoan army up north against General Omirro, it is just us to stand against Ritka and Stemple."

"Hardly just us," countered Captain Azule. "We have two-thousand mercenaries plus the dwarves and the elves."

"Against twenty-thousand men," sighed Captain Orteka. "If we do not get the Zarans to surrender, they will easily overrun us."

"I am not used to seeing you so glum," frowned Captain Azule. "Is it because of the scars?"

Captain Orteka did not answer right away. He examined his feelings and eventually nodded. “I guess it is,” he conceded. “It is hard to explain the feelings that I felt that night. I was sure that I was going to die, and I was at peace with that. It was my fate. Instead the Lanoirians maimed me and humiliated me. It was not a memory that inspires confidence. I guess just being here again brings it all back to mind.”

“The Lanoirians made a rather bad mistake that night,” smiled Captain Azule. “They should have killed you. You exacted your revenge over a thousand times before the Great War was over. You would be wise to keep that in mind. When I look at your scarred face, it reminds me to never underestimate my opponent. It also reminds me that I would rather have you by my side than anyone else. Put aside your memories, my friend. Dawn will soon be upon us, and we have another enemy army to conquer.”

“If you two are done flapping your lips,” Prince Darok growled in a friendly manner, “you might want to prepare a reception for the Federation’s advance scouts.”

The two mercenary captains turned towards the approaching dwarf.

“What makes you think they will be coming soon?” asked Captain Azule.

“I see them moving about,” answered the dwarven prince. “They will be coming soon.”

Captain Orteka pushed his dark thoughts aside and gazed into the valley. He saw nothing moving. “Are you sure?”

“Never question a dwarf’s eyes in the dark,” chuckled the dwarven Knight of Alcea. “They have been moving around for a couple of minutes already. I’ll let you know when they mount their horses.”

“Do you think they will surrender, Prince Darok?” asked Captain Azule.

“We must ensure that they do,” the dwarf answered solemnly. “If they don’t surrender, most of us will not be alive to regret our failure.” The dwarf cast his eyes on the ground and then he suddenly looked up, a broad smile brightening his face. “We can do this, mates,” he said cheerily. “We have discussed this at length. All we have to do is play the parts we agreed upon and the Zarans will be begging for mercy.” Returning to a more serious tone, the dwarf spoke with a sense of urgency, “Get ready. They are coming.”

Captain Orteka and Captain Azule immediately ran to their men and warned them to get ready. They returned riding their mounts and sat side-by-side waiting for the cavalry squad to appear. The dwarven prince stepped behind their mounts where he would not be visible

until the time was right. Time seemed to stand still as the two mercenary captains waited for the enemy to appear. While dawn was fast approaching, it was still dark enough to startle the squad leader when he finally saw the two riders before him. He called for a halt and drew his sword at the same time.

"Easy, soldier," Captain Azule said calmly. "We wish to talk, not fight. Sheath your sword."

The Federation sergeant stared at the two Sordoans in confusion for a moment and then mumbled something to the riders nearest to him. Four of the riders drew their swords and rode forward. Four of them died. Arrows flew out of the darkness from both sides of the trail, but only the four riders with drawn swords were targeted. Some of the soldiers panicked and retreated, but most of them stayed close to the squad leader. He had not moved.

"I said we wished to talk," scowled Captain Azule. "I meant it."

"Then talk," the sergeant said gruffly as he stared at the two men before him, trying not to let his eyes stray to the sides of the trail as he felt that would reveal his nervousness.

"We want to meet with General Ritka under a flag of truce," stated Captain Orteka. "Kindly deliver word to him that we will meet with him here at sunrise."

"You wear no uniforms. Why should I take you for anything other than bandits?"

"Because you are a mere sergeant," scowled Captain Orteka. "You are not supposed to think for yourself. Carry out your duty and deliver our words to your master."

The sergeant's eyes flickered towards Orteka's scarred face and he frowned heavily. The Sordoan had the look of death upon his face, and the sergeant did not care to speak to him.

"General Ritka will want to know the authority of the person seeking the meeting," the sergeant said to Captain Azule. "Who are you?"

The Sordoans' mounts moved apart and the dwarf walked forward. He wore an elaborate breastplate made of silver and gold and he hefted an axe with one hand that looked too heavy to lift with both hands. Several of the Federation soldiers gasped and backed away.

"I am Prince Darok," stated the dwarf. "I am a Knight of Alcea and given authority over all but King Arik himself. Tell General Ritka that I demand his presence at sunrise. He will be protected under a flag of truce."

"Demand?" scoffed the sergeant. "I do not think the general will take kindly to such words."

"I care little for how the words are received," scowled the dwarf. "He chose to enter my country unbidden. If he wishes to leave it alive,

he will come. If not, his blood will stain the ground of Hendy Valley forever. Begone!"

The squad leader backed away from the Sordoans and turned his horse into the valley. With his squad close behind, he galloped back into the enemy camp.

"Wasn't that a bit harsh?" asked Captain Azule. "What if the general's pride causes him to refuse to parley?"

"From what I have learned of Ritka," answered Prince Darok, "he will not be anxious to negotiate anyway, but he will come. The harshness was meant more for the sergeant's benefit. I wanted his treatment to be offensive enough that it soon becomes the talk of the camp. In that light, I think my words were appropriate."

"Time will tell," stated Captain Orteka. "Do you think they will try the southern exit from the valley?"

"Without a doubt," nodded Prince Darok. "They probably won't bother with that until they are led to believe that we have enough men here to cause them problems, but when they do, Tedi and Natia will be ready for them."

* * * *

"A dwarf?" shouted General Ritka. "You were turned back by a dwarf?"

"It was dark," frowned the sergeant. "They had archers hidden on both sides of us, and we could not see them. Had I pressed ahead, none of us would have survived to carry the message to you."

"Maybe that would have been for the best," snarled the general. "You say that the dwarf demanded my presence? Demanded? Is that what you said?"

The sergeant fidgeted. "The dwarf's voice was low and gravelly," the sergeant replied cautiously. "Perhaps I misunderstood his exact words, but his intent was clear enough. He wants to talk to you. Maybe he plans to surrender."

The tent flap was pulled aside, and Colonel Pierce hurried into the large command tent. He moved quickly to the table where the sergeant was making his report. General Ritka glanced at the colonel with annoyance.

"What is it, Pierce?"

"I heard that the enemy is demanding a meeting at sunrise," the colonel answered. "Is it true that a dwarf was in charge?"

The general glared at the sergeant. "How dare you talk of such matters to the camp, Sergeant?" scowled the general.

"I spoke to no one," the sergeant blurted out, "and I warned my men against spreading tales. I will go and stop the words from spreading."

“It is far too late for that,” interjected the colonel. “The whole camp is already talking about it. We have a dangerous situation here, General. The men are truly spooked about fighting dwarves. It all goes back to those crazy rumors that were spread in Valdo.”

“Were they just rumors?” asked the sergeant. “When we heard them the first time, we were told that dwarves were extinct and we should belittle the men for listening to tall tales, but now we are actually pitted against a dwarf. What if he has more of his fellow creatures around?”

“Shut up!” shouted General Ritka. “I will not have the likes of you spreading fear throughout my camp. Colonel, take this man out and see that he is justly punished. I want him lashed publicly to set an example for the rest of the men, and I want it done immediately. When he is raw, strip him of his rank and assign his horse to someone else. From now on, he will march with the rest of the dwarf-fearing cretins.”

As the colonel prepared to execute the general’s orders regarding the punishment of the sergeant, word spread quickly through the encampment. Men began to migrate towards the large command tent where the punishment would take place, but not everyone was eager to watch the spectacle. Sergeant Turang was making his way towards the tent when Corporal Chitor intercepted him.

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” panted the corporal. “Where are you going?”

“To see the latest flogging,” answered the sergeant. “Why were you looking for me?”

“To tell you about the dwarves,” the corporal said softly. “What are we going to do?”

“I would be careful saying such words out loud,” warned Sergeant Turang. “That is precisely why the flogging is being given this morning. The sergeant made the mistake of mentioning dwarves in the general’s presence.”

“What?” balked the corporal. “What are you talking about? Is the general trying to make believe that the dwarves don’t exist?”

“I suspect that is the truth of the matter,” shrugged the sergeant, “although it is obvious to all that other members of the advance squad saw the dwarf, too.”

“The dwarf?” asked the corporal “Then the general doesn’t know about the south exit yet?”

The sergeant stopped walking and turned to face the corporal. “What are you talking about?”

“The way to the south is blocked by dwarves,” Corporal Chitor reported nervously. “Some of the men panicked when they heard about the dwarf at the north exit. They tried to desert by leaving the

valley to the south, but dwarves confronted them. We are trapped in this valley, Turang. Trapped!"

The sergeant frowned deeply. He turned and gazed at the ridges forming the valley, but the sky was still too dark to see if there were any paths leading up the slopes to escape the coming slaughter.

"How many dwarves?" he asked the corporal.

"Thousands!" grimaced Corporal Chitor.

Sergeant Turang knew that must be an exaggeration because none of the deserters would have stuck around long enough to see that many, but it did probably indicate far more than just a couple of dwarves. If the stories told in Valdo were even near the truth, a few hundred dwarves would be enough to slay the entire encampment. He had never put any stock in those stories while he was in Valdo, but ever since the night that he almost got cleaved in two from a dwarven throwing axe, Turang took a more leery approach to battling dwarves.

"We need to find a trail that leads up to the ridge," the sergeant said conspiratorially. "When the fighting starts, we need to get out of this valley quickly. I will take the eastern side of the valley and you take the western side. Take note of any trails that look used enough to lead all the way to the top. We will meet back at our fire ring in an hour."

The two soldiers started to part company when the sergeant turned and hurried after the corporal. He grabbed Chitor by the arm and brought him to a halt.

"And don't tell anyone what you are looking for," the sergeant warned in a whisper. "This will be our secret. Got it?"

The corporal nodded exaggeratedly and pulled his arm free. Sergeant Turang turned and ran off. The corporal watched him leave and then ran in the opposite direction. Within half an hour, Chitor had shared the secret with eight of his closest friends, and they all searched the sides of the valley looking for trails leading up to the ridge.

Chapter 37

Hendy Valley

Colonel Pierce entered the large command tent. General Ritka looked up and waved him forward.

“The sun is rising,” stated the colonel.

“It does most days,” the general quipped with annoyance. “What do you want?”

“I thought I would accompany you to the parley, if that is acceptable.”

“Parley?” balked the general. “I have nothing to say to the Alceans. We are here to kill them not talk to them.”

“We have no idea what is waiting for us out there,” frowned the colonel. “That is why I wanted to join you for the parley. I thought it might give me a chance to size up the enemy forces.”

General Ritka opened his mouth to berate the inferior officer, but he did not speak, his thoughts mulling over the words of the colonel.

“Are we ready to parley?” General Stemple said as he stepped into the tent. “I am anxious to see what a dwarf looks like.”

“A dwarf?” scowled General Ritka. “Even you are infected with silly notions about long-dead creatures?”

“I am fairly confident that dwarves exist,” frowned General Stemple. “While I have not personally seen one, enough of my men have to remove all doubt in my mind. Aren’t you even curious, Ritka? They are creatures of ages gone by. It will be like looking back through the pages of history. Not many men ever have such a chance.”

General Ritka sighed and shook his head. For a moment, silence ruled the tent, but General Ritka eventually looked up at the colonel with decisiveness.

“Get a parley party formed, Colonel. We are going to see a dwarf.”

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At the northern exit of Hendy Valley, two humans and two dwarves waited impatiently.

“Ritka is not coming,” stated Captain Azule as he looked at the rising sun. “We had better prepare for battle.”

“If Ritka comes at us with the full force of his armies, we are finished,” added Captain Orteka. “Maybe we should bring your dwarves around from the southern exit, Prince Darok.”

The dwarven prince shook his head. “The fairies have not

reported any organized movement within the camp. I think it is premature to move our forces around."

"I agree," interjected Kroto, the dwarven mage from Cazra. "Your mercenary companies will be enough to keep the Federation armies bottled up until help arrives, if help is needed. Let's wait and see."

Moments later, a tiny green man glided down out of the sky and landed on the shoulder of the dwarven prince.

"A party is heading this way," announced Chip. "Two generals and one colonel are being escorted by a squad of riders."

"Can you identify the colonel?" asked Prince Darok.

"It is the one called Pierce," answered the fairy. "He is a Spinoan from the 21st Corps."

"Well done," nodded the dwarven prince. "Alert Tedi and the others that the game is about to begin."

The fairy darted upward, and the prince turned to the mage.

"Are you sure that the entire valley will hear the words spoken here?" asked Prince Darok.

"I guarantee it," answered Kroto. "Signal me when you wish me to start and end."

Prince Darok merely nodded. Silence reigned as the two humans and two dwarves waited for the enemy to arrive. Behind them concealed in the trees were two-thousand mercenaries, the only Alcean force presently between the Federation armies and the city of Trekum. They did not have long to wait.

As the Federation officers approached the northern exit, Colonel Pierce's eyes scanned the forests looking for signs of the extent of the Alcean forces. He could see men hidden among the trees everywhere he looked, but he could not see any dwarves. Up ahead, sitting astride beautiful horses, two men waited for the parley to begin. One of the men was badly scarred on both cheeks, and the colonel felt the need for his eyes to move on. He focused his attention on the other man.

"Who are you to speak for the Sordoans?" bellowed General Ritka as they approached the Alceans.

"I am Captain Azule of the Sarga Mercenary Company," stated Azule. "My companion is Captain Orteka of the Kadin Claws. I could extend a welcome to our country to you, General Ritka, but the fact is, you are not welcome in Sordoa."

"Nor any other part of Alcea," scowled Captain Orteka. "You may have come here to invade our lands, but all you shall find is death, just as those who followed Gattas and Montero found when the dwarves annihilated them. By the grace of King Arik, though, you will be given a chance to surrender. Will you do so?"

"You pompous fool," spat general Ritka. "You, a mere captain of a

mercenary company, are dictating terms to a Federation team leader? Have you no idea of the force that I lead? I have enough men to crush all of Sordoa, and I will do so. I am not so foolish as to believe in your mythical dwarves, and while I do not know where you learned of the names of Gattas and Montero, I will not for one moment believe that you Sordoans have done anything but run from their advancing armies."

"Now that is a pity." Prince Darok's voice boomed as he and Kroto stepped out of the forest and walked forward, the rising sunlight glinting off Prince Darok's silver and gold armor. His huge gleaming battleaxe held in one hand. "It is usually wiser for a moron to remain silent than to announce his stupidity. Show him, Kroto."

The three Federation officers stared in disbelief as the two dwarves approached. They watched as the one called Kroto untied a large sack and reached into it.

"Behold the head of General Gattas," Kroto said as he pulled the head from the sack by its hair. "And the head of General Montero," he added as he pulled out the other head and held it up for all to see.

"So you think we dwarves should run and hide from the mighty Federation armies, do you, Ritka?" scowled Prince Darok. "You had better think again. My people are not very endeared to the Federation whose forbearers enslaved some of my kin. In fact, we take particular pleasure in pummeling the likes of you."

General Stemple's face paled as he gazed upon the severed heads, but General Ritka's face grew scarlet with rage. The Spinoan general's hands curled into fists.

"You asked by what authority we were asking for your surrender," Prince Darok continued. "I am Prince Darok, a Knight of Alcea. I serve as the voice and sword of King Arik wherever I go. I have been authorized to accept your surrender. In fact, the king has, unfortunately, mandated me to seek it. Should you choose to accept, I would be bound to let my human compatriots escort your men to safety until they could be repatriated to their homeland. Personally, I hope you refuse to suffer such an indignity as surrender. I could take great personal satisfaction from killing you."

"Not in this lifetime, dwarf!" shouted General Ritka. "Before this day is done, it is your head that will be impaled upon a pike."

General Ritka roughly turned his horse and rode back towards the valley, but General Stemple and Colonel Pierce remained, their eyes fixed upon the heads of the two defeated generals.

"How did they die?" General Stemple asked softly. "Did they refuse to surrender?"

"They were not given the choice," answered Prince Darok.

"King Arik now believes that we Alceans should endeavor to

avoid killing your men," interjected Captain Azule. "All over Alcea the king's forces are seeking the surrender of all Federation teams. Very few Federation teams still exist as a threat."

"That is hard to believe," frowned Colonel Pierce. "I have been to Alcea before, and your nation does not have the soldiers available to go up against all of the Federation teams."

"In the Federation," replied Captain Orteka, "your lives are centered around the army. That is not true in Alcea. Our armies are small, but all of our people will fight you. Your generals had not counted on dwarves and elves fighting by our sides, but they are Alceans, too. Even our civilian populations will rise up against your armies. Such is the case of thousands of mercenaries such as the Kadin Claws, and we are formidable warriors."

"Ritka will never surrender," stated General Stemple. "Surely, you are aware of that?"

"Then he will die," shrugged Prince Darok. "I will see to it personally."

"If your men wish to surrender," stated Captain Azule, "they can do so, regardless of what General Ritka decides. They are to leave their weapons on the eastern side of the valley and then retire to the western side. Any man on the eastern side of the valley will die."

"As will any man on the western side who still holds a weapon," added Captain Orteka. "If your men are surrendering, it would behoove them to eliminate any man in the western half with a weapon, for such an armed man endangers them all."

General Stemple nodded and turned his horse around. Colonel Pierce followed and the two men rode slowly back towards General Ritka and the squad escorting them.

"What are you thinking, Colonel?" asked General Stemple.

"I don't know what to think," admitted the colonel. "I would not have believed their stories had they not produced the heads. We were supposed to meet up with Gattas and Montero today. If the mercenaries and dwarves have enough of a force to annihilate Team Pontek, it does not bode well for us being cooped up in this valley. I think we need to at least check out the southern exit from the valley. "

General Stemple nodded. "We might be able to find better ground for a battle against the Alceans. Will Ritka allow it?"

"I would be surprised if he is not already planning such a scouting mission," answered Colonel Pierce. "He will see this valley as a good defensive position but a lousy offensive one. If he wishes to carry the fight to the enemy, he needs to find a way out of here."

"What took you so long?" snarled General Ritka as General Stemple and Colonel Pierce approached the escort. "We do not have time to wile away. Pierce, I want you to scout out the southern exit.

See if we can extricate ourselves from this valley without the enemy being aware."

"I will go with him," stated general Stemple. "I feel a need to see for myself."

General Ritka shrugged with indifference, and the group headed back into the valley. As they rode through the camp, Colonel Pierce noticed that the mood of the camp was odd. All of the men watched the generals ride towards the large command tent, and that was not unusual in itself, but there was also a look of fear upon many of their faces. Some of the men openly glared at General Ritka. That was not a wise posture to adopt in the Federation army, but the Spinoan general did not seem to notice. Without a word, General Ritka dismounted at the tent and disappeared inside. The squad leader continued onward, leading his men as an escort for the two officers heading to the southern exit of the valley.

The southern exit of the valley was less wooded with large stately trees sparsely populating a grassy plain. The colonel saw three individuals standing boldly in the middle of the trail. One was a man holding a staff, and one was a dwarf, but the colonel's eyes were drawn to the third figure, a black-cloak. He shivered involuntarily and ordered a halt to the small column.

"We have come to talk," shouted the colonel.

"Then come and talk," called back the man with the staff. "Leave your soldiers where they are."

Colonel Pierce and General Stemple rode forward and halted before the three Alceans. The colonel noticed hundreds of dwarves lurking among the trees, and he felt a shiver race up his spine. He focused his eyes on the dwarf standing alongside the man with the staff.

"Are you also a Knight of Alcea?" he asked.

"I am a Knight of Alcea, Colonel Pierce," stated the man with the staff. "My name is Tedi. Why have you come here?"

The colonel blinked at the use of his name. He refocused his eyes on the speaker as if evaluating him. While Tedi's body appeared fit and muscular, he did not even carry a sword. It was hard for the colonel to imagine the Alcean as being anyone special.

"You know my name?" questioned the colonel.

"You will find that we Alceans know far more about you than you know about us," Tedi replied with a taut smile. "Had you known about us, you would never have undertaken such a poorly advised invasion. I notice that General Ritka chose not to accompany you and General Stemple. Does that indicate that he will refuse to surrender?"

"How do you know so much about us?" asked General Stemple.

"How we know so much is not a matter that needs discussion,"

replied Tedi. “You already have enough to think about. Will you act boldly to save the lives of your men, General, or will you sacrifice them out of stubborn pride as General Ritka intends to do?”

“Your knowledge about us might answer that question for me,” retorted General Stemple. “Merely knowing our names does not convince me that you can beat my army in a fight. Why then should I consider surrendering?”

“He is wondering if you know about the other teams,” stated the dwarf. “He holds onto a foolish notion that delaying us here will give some advantage to the other teams.”

Tedi nodded to Doryelgar, the dwarven mage from Talman.

“Fair enough,” said Tedi. “Team Pontek was completely destroyed, as I am sure you are aware. In Lanoir, Team Chi and Team Elmor have already surrendered. I am not sure about Team Barouk. In Targa, Team Danver Shores has surrendered, and all of Force Cordonia is out of the war. That only leaves a handful of functioning Federation teams still in this war, and appropriate Alcean forces are dealing with them. None of your remaining teams have mages or food. Their men are tired and hungry. If you are wondering about Team Caldar, the Alcean forces here at Hendy Valley will not be needed to deal with General Omirro. You will gain nothing for the Federation by having your men die this day. Dwell upon that, General Stemple.”

The general nodded, satisfied that the Alceans did indeed know the complete Federation battle plans.

“We will return to camp and tell General Ritka of your words,” stated General Stemple.

The two officers retreated to the escorting squad and then returned to the valley.

“General Ritka will never surrender,” Colonel Pierce said softly.

“I know,” replied General Stemple. “What do you think about our chances of exiting this valley?”

“They are not good,” answered the colonel. “While I did not see overwhelming opposition at either exit, it would not take a large number of men to close off the valley. The exits are narrow enough to stop us from presenting a broad face to the enemy. Perhaps if we could get a regiment over the top of the ridge…”

The colonel glanced up at the ridge as he spoke, and he suddenly halted, his mouth gaping open as he saw the ridge lined with dwarves. He turned quickly and gazed up at the other ridge.

“They have us surrounded,” gasped the colonel. “Look!”

General Stemple looked at the ridges without a visible display of emotion. “It doesn’t surprise me,” he said calmly. “In fact, I would have been surprised if they were not up there. The Alceans have planned this well. The question now before us is if we can figure a

way out of this trap."

"Do we have a choice?" the colonel asked distractedly as he watched a commotion before them. "General Ritka is the team leader, and there is little doubt to what his orders will be. Much blood is going to flow this day."

"What is going on?" asked General Stemple as he also focused on the commotion.

"I am not sure," admitted the colonel as the two officers halted their horses near the large group of men gathered around a pair fighting. "Stop!" he shouted with an air of authority. "Stop it this minute!"

The group immediately noticed the officers and backed away from the scuffle. As the colonel's eyes focused on the two fighting men, those in the group slowly backed away, getting lost in the maze of soldiers.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the colonel.

"He was planning on deserting," one of the men said, pointing at the other accusingly. "I saw him drop his sword at the eastern edge of the valley. Now he claims that he has lost it."

"I did lose my sword," the accused soldier said defensively. "He is lying."

General Stemple looked at the arm patches of the soldiers and recognized them as his men. He dismounted and walked up to the fighters. He glanced at the accuser and dismissed him before turning his attention to the swordless man.

"Who told you to leave your sword in the eastern half of the valley?" he asked.

The soldier started shaking his head as if the general had misunderstood the situation, but as he opened his mouth to reply, the general interrupted him.

"Do not even think of lying to me," the general warned in an ominous tone. "I asked you a question and I expect a truthful answer. Disappoint me and you will wish you had not."

The soldier swallowed hard and nodded shamefully. "We heard the instructions given to you, and we know that General Ritka will refuse to surrender. None of us want to die to dwarves, General."

"Who told you what was said at the parley?" asked the general.

"No one told us, General," replied the soldier. "We heard your voices. The whole valley heard it all."

The general glanced at Colonel Pierce with a worried look on his face. The colonel said nothing. The general returned his attention to the soldier.

"Go find your sword," he ordered. "I will not have my men taking things into their own hands. I still command the 29th Corps and you

will follow my orders until I no longer command."

General Stemple returned to his horse and mounted it. Without a backward glance at the soldier, he started riding slowly towards the large command tent. Colonel Pierce rode alongside him.

"I have been thinking about the words that were uttered while we were with the Alceans," the colonel said softly. "If everyone heard what was said at the parley, we will not have a functioning army much longer. They will know about the dwarves and the fate of Gattas and Montero."

"I know," agreed General Stemple. "I now understand all of the dwarf sightings of the past few days and the spread of rumors in Valdo. The Alceans are playing mind games with our men, and they are winning."

"You think they are bluffing?" asked Colonel Pierce. "Are they trying to get us to surrender because that is the only way that they can win?"

"I am not sure," answered the general. "I would have readily said yes before, but that would not explain how they managed to defeat Gattas and Montero. The truth is, we don't know how strong the enemy is. What we do need to understand though is how weak we are. Ritka thinks he still has twenty-thousand men under his command."

"And you disagree?"

"Strongly," General Stemple said with a nod of his head. "Look around, Pierce. These men are all scared out of their wits. More than half of them would bolt given the slightest chance, and I am not sure about the other half. Given a strong dwarven charge, or even an effective use of battle magic by that black-cloak they have, and these armies would collapse. The flow of Federation blood would be immense."

"They must have more than one mage," frowned the colonel. "The black-cloak was not present when we met with the mercenaries, and that is where leaving the swords in the eastern part of the valley was mentioned. It does seem like the Alceans have outsmarted us, but none of this will change General Ritka's mind. He will never surrender."

"Then perhaps it might be time for Team Gortha to have new leadership," the general replied softly.

The colonel's eyes grew large as he understood the meaning of the general's words. The only way that General Ritka could be replaced as head of Team Gortha was if the Spinoan general was dead.

"You can't be serious?" balked the colonel.

"Pierce," the general said in a serious tone, "there is more than a good chance that you and I will both die today. If Ritka orders an attack, and we both know that he will do so, half of the men in this

valley will refuse to fight. They are more afraid of the dwarves than they are afraid of Ritka. How will Ritka respond to that?"

"He would not stand for it," the colonel answered without hesitation. "He will order the shirkers seized and punished."

"So we will have our very own civil war here within the valley," declared the general, "while the enemy still waits for us to emerge. Or better yet, the dwarves can enter the valley while we are fighting among ourselves. They have us beat, Pierce, and they didn't even have to unsheathe their swords to do it."

The colonel nodded in agreement.

"What are you going to do about this situation?" asked General Stemple. "Are you ready to watch your men die needlessly?"

"You want me to die so my men can surrender?" frowned the colonel. "That is what you are asking of me. You must realize that. If I kill General Ritka to save the men, I will be hung. I would rather die fighting the dwarves."

"If Ritka orders an attack, you won't live long enough to see another dwarf," retorted General Stemple. "Mutinous men will kill their officers first. Besides, there is no reason for you to die. With Ritka dead, I would inherit the position of team leader, and it would be my right and duty to pass sentence on you."

"And you would spare me?" questioned the colonel.

General Stemple smiled. "I would reward you. In fact, I think you would make an excellent replacement as general of the 21st Corps. You could claim that Ritka had lost his senses, and I would praise you for noticing it and taking action. Who is going to argue against us?"

"And what good would a promotion do me?" questioned the colonel. "I would only lead the 21st Corps for an hour at most as the men lined up to surrender."

"The Alceans promised to repatriate us," the general pointed out. "You would return home as a general. A defeated general to be sure, but we will all return home defeated in any event."

"Unless the Alceans fail to defeat the remaining teams," argued the colonel.

General Stemple shrugged. "If Omirro manages to defeat the Alceans, he will rescue us from wherever the Alceans imprisoned us. Then you will return home as a general of a victorious force. You have nothing to lose, Pierce. It is the only way that either of us will survive this day. Do you have the guts to see it through?"

For a long time, the colonel remained silent. Eventually he nodded. "I do not care much for this solution to the problem, but I can find no better. Ritka would expend the life of every man in this valley rather than bend his knee to the Alceans. I cannot let such senseless pride be the cause of such massive destruction, but I will handle this

my own way. Dismiss the squad when you reach your tent, and stay away from Ritka. Find an excuse not to meet with him. I do not want him to know anything about the southern exit."

General Stemple nodded in agreement, but he raised an eyebrow at the request. Colonel Pierce turned his horse and headed back towards the southern exit without an escort.

Chapter 38

Generals

Colonel Pierce rode through Hendy Valley towards the southern exit. As he rode through the camp, he watched the men closely. He noticed many of the men moving towards the western side of the valley, and he noted that they had all seemed to have lost their swords. He shook his head at the effectiveness of the Alcean plot. Up until now the officers had worried about the men fighting over scraps of food, but a deadlier game was about to unfold unless he acted quickly. Soon it would be those wishing to surrender against those loyal to General Ritka, and the squabbles would be bloody.

When he reached the exit, he halted and dismounted instead of riding up to where the Knight of Alcea stood. He signaled for Tedi to approach him alone. The Knight of Alcea hesitated, but he eventually complied with the request.

"I do not want my words heard in the valley," the colonel said in a whisper. "Instruct your black-cloak of my desire so that we may speak plainly."

"Our words are only between the two of us," Tedi assured the colonel. "What is it that you wish to speak about?"

"I need your help. General Stemple and I have agreed to surrender, but General Ritka must die for that to happen without greater bloodshed."

"And you don't want to kill him yourself?" asked Tedi.

"Would you want to kill your superior officer?" countered the colonel. "I am a soldier, not an assassin."

Tedi hesitated to reply. He stared at the colonel for a moment and then gazed blankly at the ground before returning his eyes to the colonel.

"If I kill General Ritka," asked Tedi, "do I have assurances that both the 21st Corps and the 29th Corps will surrender?"

"General Stemple has already agreed," answered the colonel. "He will become the leader of Team Gortha upon Ritka's death."

"And you agree as a colonel of the 21st Corps?"

"You have my word," replied Colonel Pierce. "I will find an excuse to bring him here."

"No," Tedi said quickly and firmly. "We have extended what amounts to a flag of truce here. I will not attack an enemy under those conditions unless he attacks me first. Can you get General Ritka to do

that?"

"No," frowned the colonel. "He would never be so foolish as to draw his sword surrounded by your archers."

"I didn't think so," replied Tedi.

"Then you will not help save my men?" the colonel asked, his voice soft with disappointment.

Colonel Pierce saw movement out of the corner of his eye, and he turned to see a beautiful saddled horse walking towards Tedi.

"Mount up, Colonel," Tedi said. "We are going to see General Ritka."

The colonel turned to the Knight of Alcea, his eyes wide with awe. "You are going to ride into a Federation camp alone and kill the commanding general?"

"I am not going alone," Tedi smiled thinly. "You are going with me." Tedi turned to the dwarf and the black-cloak as he mounted his horse. "I am going to see General Ritka," he called to them. "Nothing has changed until you hear from me."

The black-cloak nodded in understanding, and the two riders turned their horses and headed into the valley.

"Will your soldiers attack me?" asked Tedi as they rode into Hendy Valley.

"Not unless they have cause to," answered the colonel. "While you are riding with me, no one will disturb you, but I cannot speak for their reactions after you kill the general. The command tent will have four guards stationed outside, and Ritka might bring them inside if he understands who you are. I will try to protect you, but they may ignore me when they see Ritka dead. Some of the men are fiercely loyal to him."

Tedi merely nodded, and they rode on in silence for a while. Tedi glanced around the encampment with curiosity, and the soldiers gazed back at him with an even greater curiosity. He could only imagine what they might be saying to one another about the strange visitor. They had to know that he was an Alcean.

"I really must apologize," Colonel Pierce said softly. "You must think me a fool, but I never imagined that you would simply ride into camp. Perhaps it would be better if I found another way to accomplish this. I have no right to ask for your life to save my men."

"With luck," Tedi replied, "only General Ritka will die this day, but I can make no promises. If your men attack me, I will vigorously defend myself. Do what you can to stop your soldiers from trying to kill me."

"I can keep the men away from you except for the four guards," promised the colonel, "but they will be more than sufficient to kill you. Ritka chooses the best for guard duty on his tent. Let's turn

around."

"Turning around now would cost you your life," Tedi pointed out. "General Ritka would surely hear about you riding through the camp with an Alcean at your side. What do you suppose his reaction would be?"

The colonel glanced around and saw everyone staring at him and Tedi. He shuddered as he realized that the Alcean was correct.

"I've really made a mess of this, haven't I?"

"You appear to be a good man, Colonel," Tedi replied. "You are doing your best to save the lives of your men, and that is exactly what a good officer should be doing. I can kill General Ritka in a manner that will be deniable, but if the guards attack me, everyone will know that I killed them. That will make my exit from your camp a dangerous proposition. In any event, you do not want to remain inside the tent with me. Lead me to General Ritka and then depart."

The colonel had taken a sudden liking to the Alcean, but Tedi's casual boasting of killing the four guards after being told that they were the best in the 21st Corps rankled Pierce. He sighed deeply as he tried to think of a way out of the mess he had created. All too soon they arrived at the large command tent and dismounted. The colonel glanced at General Stemple's tent next door and wondered if the Aertan general could order the guards to remain outside. It was worth a try, but Pierce was not sure if they would obey Stemple.

Colonel Pierce led Tedi to the tent flap of the large command tent. The four guards glared at the Alcean, but they made no move to stop the colonel from escorting Tedi into the tent. General Ritka looked up with annoyance on his face, but that expression soon turned to confusion.

"Who is this?" scowled General Ritka.

"He may have information about the Alceans that is vital to our plans," declared Colonel Pierce as he led Tedi towards the table where the general was sitting. "I will go get General Stemple. I am sure he would like to hear what this man has to say."

The general opened his mouth to object, but the colonel was too quick. He exited the tent and left the Alcean and the general alone. Ritka looked at the Alcean with distaste.

"I do not permit weapons in my presence," spat the general. "Lose the staff and sit down."

Tedi smiled and nodded. He dropped the staff on the ground and sat across from the general, whispering softly to himself as he sat.

"What did you say?" demanded the general.

"It was a prayer," smiled Tedi as his hand moved silently under the table where the general could not see it. "I understand that the dwarves have demanded your surrender, General Ritka. Is that true?"

The general frowned in confusion. He silently cursed the colonel for not explaining who the Alcean was or why he was being presented to the general.

Tedi held a smile on his lips as he eased the myric-quill-filled reed out of the small quiver at his waist. The shot would be a simple one, but the trick would be in getting the reed to his lips without the general shouting for the guards. He needed a distraction, and Tedi had alerted Button to provide it.

"Just who are you, and what do you know about the dwarves?" asked the general.

"My name is Tedi," answered the Knight of Alcea. "I know that dwarves can be a merciless foe, but…"

"Tedi?" shouted the general. "I thought I had recognized your voice. You are one of them! Guards!"

Tedi cursed as he quickly brought the reed to his lips and blew the myric quill into the general's neck. He had forgotten that Doryelgar had magically sent the conversation into the valley while General Ritka had been in his tent. He should have used a false name instead of his own.

The tent flap flew open, and Tedi tumbled out of his chair, stretching to reach his staff. He heard the pounding of the soldiers' footsteps as his fingers wrapped around the staff.

* * * *

Colonel Pierce raced to the smaller command tent and barged inside when he saw no guards outside of it. General Stemple looked up with a start, but his face soon took on a questioning expression.

"Did you do it?" the general asked.

"I could not," replied the colonel as he waved the general to his feet. "I had planned to lure Ritka to the southern exit from the valley and have the Alceans oblige us, but I have managed to botch everything. The one called Tedi is with Ritka right now in his tent. He will kill Ritka, but I am afraid that the guards will intervene. I need your help to save Tedi's life. Come quickly."

General Stemple had already risen from his chair, but he now hesitated.

"An Alcean assassin?" he mused. "How are we going to explain aiding his departure from the camp? Have you thought this through?"

Colonel Pierce fidgeted nervously. "I haven't had time to think it through," he admitted, "and we don't have time now. If we don't move quickly, both Ritka and Tedi will be dead, and I was seen escorting the Alcean into the tent."

"We might be able to get around that," suggested the general.

General Stemple clearly was not done with his words, but the colonel could brook no further delay.

“I vowed to get Tedi back out of this camp, and I will not abandon him. If you will not help me, I will do what I can on my own.”

The colonel whirled and pulled the tent flap away.

“Wait,” the general called after him. “I will help. I merely wanted to think things through before acting.”

“We are out of time,” sighed the colonel as he gazed at the large command tent and saw no guards in front of it.

The colonel raced towards the large command tent with the general right behind him. Pierce threw open the tent flap and stared uncomprehendingly. Bodies littered the floor of the tent, but a lone figure stood and stared defensively at the tent flap, his staff held ready to attack. General Stemple nudged the colonel from the rear, urging him into the tent. The two officers entered the tent and let the flap close.

“What manner of man are you?” gasped the colonel. “No man should have survived an attack from the four of them.”

“I am a Knight of Alcea,” Tedi stated confidently. “The guards are not dead. I was able to subdue them without resorting to fatal means. They will be fine when they wake up, but I would prefer not to be here when that happens.”

General Stemple ignored the bodies of the guards. He moved around the table and knelt next to Ritka’s body to be sure that he was dead. He stared at the bluish tint of the general’s skin and frowned deeply.

“Would you happen to know a Colonel Belasko?” asked General Stemple as he rose to his feet and stared at Tedi.

“I served under him for a time,” Tedi answered with a smirk.

“What are you talking about?” asked Colonel Pierce. “Why bring the deaths of the black-cloaks into this?”

“Because Ritka was killed in the same manner,” answered General Stemple. “His body has the same bluish tint.”

The colonel’s eyes grew wide as he stared at Tedi questioningly. “Who is Belasko really?”

“Another Knight of Alcea,” Tedi answered impatiently. “While I do not mind the questions, I think our time is better spent elsewhere. How will you explain the general’s death?”

For a moment, neither officer spoke then General Stemple walked around to the front of the table and looked at the bodies.

“Where were you when the guards entered the tent?” the general asked.

“In the chair offered to me,” answered Tedi.

“Excellent,” smiled the general. “We told the men that the black-cloaks had died from eating poisonous foods. I doubt that many men

believed the story, but that hardly matters. It was the official explanation for the deaths of the black-cloaks, and it will be the official explanation for General Ritka's demise. These guards," he continued with a wave at the four bodies, "will be doubly punished, although not severely."

"Doubly punished?" inquired the colonel.

"Once for attacking an invited guest without provocation," smiled the general, "and once more for failing to subdue a lone Alcean. I may offer to waive the second punishment out of embarrassment for their performance."

Tedi chuckled. "Waive both punishments and none of them will speak about what transpired here today. I think you have the situation under control, General. When can Prince Darok expect your surrender?"

"Within the hour," answered General Stemple. "Colonel Pierce and I have to coordinate things so that we do not have a mutiny in the process. I will provide an escort for your return to the southern exit."

Tedi looked towards the tent flap and smiled broadly. "I do not think that will be necessary. My people have already become concerned about the length of my stay here."

The two officers turned towards the flap and gasped when they saw that a black-cloak had been standing silently behind them. They nodded wordlessly as Tedi crossed the room and stepped out of the tent with the black-cloak.

The two Alceans rode silently away from the large command tent. Tedi noticed that while the soldiers were still curious about his presence in the camp, they averted their eyes from the black-cloak. He chuckled inwardly.

"You took a risk coming in after me," he said softly.

"You would do the same for me," smiled Natia. "When can we leave to join General Mobami against Team Caldar?"

"As soon as General Stemple surrenders."

* * * *

Jenneva and Queen Tanya finished up their leisurely morning meal and sat talking to Theos and Balamor about the effectiveness of various spells. When the first rays of sunlight glinted through the forest canopy, Jenneva frowned.

"It is sunrise already," Jenneva stated. "Why are we not moving south to the next observation post?"

"A good question," the queen responded anxiously. "Let's go find out."

The four mages rose and climbed the hill towards the dugout. When they reached it, they found the king, Alex, Colonel David Jaynes, and Colonel Mitar Vidson talking softly.

“Is something the matter?” asked the queen.

“Neither Bledsoe’s army nor Kozinski’s army have broken camp,” answered King Arik.

“They haven’t even sent out the advance scouts,” added David. “Something strange is going on.”

“It is possible that the loss of their mages has made them hesitant to move before the sun is fully up,” suggested Mitar. “They certainly know that they are now facing more than mere snipers to be used against their foragers. I suspect the four of you hurt them badly yesterday.”

“Have you sent a fairy to investigate?” asked the queen.

King Arik nodded. “Prince Midge went himself. He should be back soon.”

Jenneva frowned. She noticed that Alex was not contributing to the conversation, and that meant that his mind was elsewhere.

“What are you thinking, Alex?” she asked softly.

Alex shook his head as if breaking out of a trance. He looked at Jenneva and smiled sheepishly as if he had just realized that she was there.

“I was thinking that General Bledsoe has shown that he is not a typical Federation general,” stated Alex. “His division of forces to trap game is clever, and he appears more willing than other Federation generals to let his subordinate general exercise near total control over his own army. That means that we might have two large armies to worry about instead of just one.”

“You think they might split up?” asked David.

“I don’t know,” answered Alex. “I was just thinking about what they might do, or more importantly, what we want to make them do. Splitting their armies might help them or hurt them, depending on what we do about it.”

“Whatever we plan to do,” commented Mitar, “we had better start planning it soon. They are only three days from Tagaret.”

“Or longer,” Alex said distractedly.

“What do you mean longer?” asked the king. “They have a schedule to keep.”

“General Bledsoe is not going to destroy his army trying to keep to a schedule,” answered Alex. “He is too smart for that. In fact, I would be willing to wager that his armies do not leave camp today.”

“Why wouldn’t they leave camp?” asked Theos.

“Because we expect them to keep to their schedule,” sighed Alex. “Mitar, you said that the black-cloaks were seen flying in the days before they died. Do you think the Federation was using them only to communicate with the other teams or could they have been spying on your forces as well?”

“I would suspect both,” answered the leader of the Alcean Rangers. “They were careful not to fly low enough to get shot, so their estimates of our forces will not be very good. Our men know how to keep hidden fairly well.”

“You can’t hide four-thousand men and their horses completely,” Alex responded. “General Bledsoe must know that he is facing a force large enough not to be ignored. With the loss of his mages, he will hold up in camp today and send out spies to see what his opposition looks like.”

“And disregard his schedule?” asked the king.

“To a degree,” Alex nodded. “It is possible for him to cover three-days of his schedule in two days. His men will be fed and rested should he need to force march them. In the meantime, he forces us to make a decision. General Fortella and Team Mya are also three days away from Tagaret. If we spend the day here waiting to see what General Bledsoe does, Team Mya will be only two days from Tagaret. It is a clever move.”

“Dastardly clever,” scowled King Arik. “If we leave here to intercept General Fortella, team Miram is free to break camp and continue their march down the Coastal Highway.”

Alex nodded. “General Bledsoe’s problem though is that he still doesn’t know what he is facing outside his camp. How will he know if we have left to confront Team Mya?”

“By sending out scouts,” answered David Jaynes. “It is the only way he will know.”

Prince Midge glided down out of the sky and landed on King Arik’s shoulder.

“The spying mission has been successful,” boasted the fairy prince. “The enemy is building a fort.”

“A fort?” echoed the king.

“A fort,” confirmed Prince Midge. “They are digging trenches and organizing lumbermen to fell trees. You will probably hear the sounds of the axes soon.”

Mitar Vidson looked at Alex and smiled as he shook his head. “So much for Bledsoe’s enemy not expecting his next move. What is our plan of attack?”

“There is not an easy answer to that question,” mused Alex. “General Bledsoe will not readily surrender. He is going to have to be hurt badly before he sees reason, and that will require a great deal of bloodshed on both sides. It would help if Team Miram was the only threat left against Tagaret. We then might be able to draw out the engagement long enough for him to understand that he is not going to win, but I doubt he would believe us if we told him that the other teams were out of the war.”

“We could prove it to him,” suggested King Arik. “We could bring the defeated generals here to meet with Bledsoe.”

“Or their heads,” Mitar nodded in agreement.

“That would mean turning our attention to Team Mya starting today,” frowned David. “We can’t afford to let time slide by for both teams. They are getting too close to Tagaret.”

“General Fortella will never surrender,” stated Alex. “Clint has made that clear, but his second, General Whitman, might have no such compunction. Whitman has a reputation for cowardice among some of the other generals.”

“You aren’t talking about the Rangers and Red Swords taking on Team Mya, are you, Father?” the queen asked accusingly. “You plan on going after General Fortella alone. Am I wrong?”

“Sort of,” Alex replied. “I was planning on taking your mother with me.”

Queen Tanya inhaled deeply and clenched her teeth, but she said nothing.

“What will that accomplish?” asked King Arik. “We have not planned for the surrender of Team Mya. We do not even have wagons to transport the prisoners. I see it only as a diversion.”

“We will not be seeking the surrender of Team Mya,” explained Alex. “If I can assassinate General Fortella and leave General Whitman in charge of Team Mya, we can afford to let them continue marching on Tagaret. General Whitman will move much more cautiously than Fortella would, and I think that would buy us the time we need to deal with General Bledsoe. I would like to bloody Team Miram with as few casualties on our side as possible.”

The king looked at the queen for direction and Tanya grudgingly nodded her approval.

“Your plan would endanger Tagaret if General Bledsoe suddenly decides to resume his march,” frowned David Jaynes. “We do not have enough men to stop him if he truly makes his mind up to head south. That would result in both teams gathering before the walls of Tagaret.”

“Balamor can help in that regard,” interjected Jenneva. “His illusions can add thousands of men to your ranks. Do not attempt to prohibit Bledsoe’s spies from scouting. Give them free reign, but make sure that they see soldiers wherever they go. That should keep Team Miram holed up in their makeshift fort until we can figure out a way to finish them off.”

King Arik nodded in agreement and then looked at Alex and Jenneva with a pained expression. “Do not push it if the odds become too great. We will find another way.”

Alex nodded silently, took Jenneva’s hand, and led her down the

slope to depart.

Theos frowned deeply and spoke softly to the queen, “Do not push it? He is going alone into the midst of twenty-thousand men to kill their leader. I cannot imagine the minimal odds of success for such a mission.”

Queen Tanya bit her lip. Those were words that she had not needed to hear, and tears formed in the corners of her eyes. She had tried to honor her vow not to interfere when her parents engaged in dangerous missions, but it proved too hard for her.

“Go with them, Theos,” the queen said softly. “Watch over them for me.”

Chapter 39

Bumps in the Road

The captain leading the vanguard of the 9th Corps of the Empire of Barouk raised his hand to bring the column to a halt. Far before him a small tent sat in the middle of the Barouk-Ongchi Road. He could see four horses standing alongside the tent, but only one person was visible. It was the first sighting of a Lanoirian in days, and the captain was not entirely sure how to handle the situation. If the 9th Corps still had a cavalry, he would send riders forward to capture the locals and seize their horses, but he had none. He felt sure that the Lanoirians would flee before his foot soldiers could reach the tent.

"They're flying a flag of truce," the sergeant behind the captain said with surprise. "What do you make of it?"

The captain squinted into the sun, his hand rising to shield the brilliance from his eyes. Then he saw it. It was a flag of truce, and his reaction was immediate.

"Your squad will escort me, Sergeant," ordered the captain, "and send word back to General Kolling. I do not want him unaware of this development."

Twenty men formed ranks around the captain, and the group set off for the tent. The captain kept his eyes on the tent and the person outside it as they got closer, and he soon realized that the lone person was female. His curiosity grew. When they came within one-hundred paces of the tent, the captain called a halt.

"Spread your men out and stay alert," the captain instructed the sergeant. "I am going to see what this is all about."

The captain advanced cautiously. The tent appeared to be paper thin, and he could see the silhouettes of three men inside. The men appeared relaxed, and that brought a frown to the captain's face. The woman also appeared relaxed, although her face showed no emotion. She stood behind a small table that held a teapot and three cups. A decorative rug was spread out before the table, and pillows placed upon it. It was a ludicrous sight in the middle of a major road, and even more ridiculous when one considered the armies marching towards it.

"Welcome to Lanoir, Captain," the woman said when the captain had reached the area of the rug. "I am Rut-ki, a Knight of Alcea. I would like a chance to speak with General Kolling under this flag of truce. He may bring General Gertz with him if he so desires."

The captain glanced at the tent and the silhouettes of the men inside. “I must know who the general will be meeting with. Have the men come out so that I might see them.”

Rut-ki smiled and walked around the rug until she stood before the captain.

“The men inside the tent are generals,” she said softly. “They will not leave the shade of the tent until your generals arrive. It is my task to arrange the meeting. I am sure that you understand.”

The captain understood, but he was unmoved by the woman’s soft voice. “I must insist.”

“Then we shall just wait here until they arrive on their own,” shrugged Rut-ki. “I will mention to General Kolling that I was prepared to send two of my mounts to carry him and General Gertz here, but that you refused to carry my words to him. I do not think he will be pleased.”

The captain’s brow creased as he looked at the beautiful horses. He knew that if General Kolling got on one of them that the Lanoirians would never get it back. The offer was tempting, and he knew that it was meant to be. It still bothered him that he was being denied the chance to ensure that the meeting spot was secure.

“I cannot advise General Kolling to attend a meeting when the participants are unknown.”

“I do not recall asking you to advise him,” scowled Rut-ki. “I asked you to carry my words to General Kolling. If he is afraid to meet with me and the generals, then that will be his decision, but I am not about to allow a junior enemy officer to gaze upon these generals. You are not authorized to meet with them. Make your choice, Captain. Take two mounts to carry your generals here, or turn around and walk away.”

There was really no decision to be made. He had to report the incident to General Kolling in any event. He might as well take the horses. He walked to the horses and untied the reins to two of them. He led them back to where he had left his escort and ordered the men to retreat to a safe distance. He then mounted one of the horses and led the other towards the Federation column. Moments later, he halted in front of General Kolling and General Gertz.

“A gift?” General Kolling smiled broadly. “Now those are the type of Lanoirians I want to find more of. Dismount, Captain.”

“The horses are meant to carry you and General Gertz to a parley,” the captain said as he dismounted and handed the reins to General Kolling. “I do not believe them to be a gift. General, there is a woman up there calling herself Rut-ki. She claims to be a Knight of Alcea, whatever that is. There is also a tent with three men inside. Rut-ki claims that they are generals, but she would not allow me to

see them. I don't like the meeting from a security standpoint. Your safety cannot be assured."

"How do you know that there are three men inside the tent?"

"The sun is illuminating their silhouettes. The men appeared relaxed, but I get an uneasy feeling about the whole affair."

"We will take a squad of archers with us," stated General Kolling as he handed the reins of one of the horses to General Gertz and then mounted the other horse.

"I left a squad within range," replied the captain.

General Kolling merely nodded. "Come, Gertz. It will feel good to ride again."

The two generals galloped off towards the vanguard, the column of soldiers spreading apart to allow the riders through.

"Magnificent beasts!" General Kolling shouted to General Gertz. "I think they are Occans. I wonder where the Lanoirians got them."

If General Gertz replied, General Kolling never heard it, but it mattered little. All too soon the tent came into view, and the generals slowed their horses to a walk. General Kolling's eyes immediately took everything in, and he shook his head at the foreignness of it all. As he rode slowly past the squad of Federation soldiers, he warned them to be alert. The generals halted their horses just past the squad of Federation soldiers and surveyed the scene. The woman stood staring at them, her face emotionless. She carried no weapons, and General Kolling's eyes moved on. He saw the silhouettes of the generals and let his eyes linger on them for a moment. The men did not appear poised to attack, but their presence disturbed General Kolling for some reason. Perhaps it was because a parley should be a momentous occasion, and the men could not be bothered to exit the tent when they heard the approaching horses. The Baroukan general had no doubt that they had heard his approach. Lastly, General Kolling scanned the trees on both sides of the road. He could neither see anyone waiting to ambush him, nor did he see signs of heavy traffic to and from the road. He nodded with satisfaction and rode slowly forward. He moved near the tether line and dismounted, General Gertz mimicking his moves. Both men tied their horses to the line and turned to face the woman.

"You are Rut-ki?" asked General Kolling.

"I am," the woman replied. "Come and sit. I will pour you some tea."

The woman turned her back to the Federation generals in a trusting manner and poured three cups of tea. When she was done, she sat on the rug and waved her hand as an invitation to join her. General Kolling raised an eyebrow and did not move.

"Just who are you, Rut-ki?" he asked.

“I am a Knight of Alcea,” answered the woman. “Are you familiar with the term?”

General Kolling shook his head.

“It means that I am authorized by King Arik to speak and act in his behalf,” Rut-ki explained. “There are a few others like myself. Come and sit, General Kolling.”

“You know my name?” questioned the general.

Rut-ki smiled. “I know much about you and General Gertz. The two of you have been in my country the longest of all of the teams sent by the Federation. You have already had ten days to explore the beauty of Lanoir. What do you think of it?”

General Kolling frowned deeply, not because of what Rut-ki knew, but rather because of her carefree attitude in the presence of a powerful enemy. She was treating him as if the parley was a social gathering and it was time to mingle with newfound friends and acquaintances. It seemed absurd to him. He turned and gazed back towards his armies. Twenty-thousand men stood idle while this woman invited him to tea.

“Your men will not be attacked while we meet,” offered Rut-ki, “if that is what you are concerned about.”

General Kolling spun to face the woman. “As if your armies could afford to attack me. What game are you playing at, Rut-ki?”

“This is no game, General Kolling,” Rut-ki answered. “Your Federation has sent you here to conquer and destroy my homeland. I do not consider that a game. I am here to talk to you with hopes that we might avoid further bloodshed. Is that not worth a few minutes of your time?”

“Further bloodshed?” echoed the Baroukan general. “If you consider picking off a few of my foragers as bloodshed, you are truly in for a rude awakening.”

“Perhaps Rut-ki is talking about surrender,” interjected General Gertz. “If she has the authority of the king to do so, it would avoid further bloodshed.”

“Actually,” Rut-ki replied, “I am talking about surrender. It is the only thing that makes sense for you. Your men are starving, and they are footsore. You are behind schedule, if that even matters any more. You have lost your battle mages and your horses. Why persist on a campaign that can bring nothing but death to your men?”

“How audacious of you!” snapped General Kolling. “You think you can serve tea in the middle of the road and then demand a surrender from a vastly superior force? I told you before that this is not a game that we are playing. I will take great pleasure in reducing Ongchi to rubble when I get there, and I will make sure that you are around to watch. You have no idea what you are up against. You

cannot even fathom the forces that are gathering to crush your entire country. Take your pitiful generals and retreat to Ongchi while you still have a few days to offer up your prayers."

Rut-ki rose slowly and walked to the tent. She threw the flap open and then turned to face General Kolling.

"We know exactly what we are up against General Kolling," Rut-ki said calmly. "In fact, we know far more about the situation than you do. These are not my generals in the tent but yours."

General Gertz gasped as he watched the three Federation generals walk out of the tent.

"You would be well advised to hear her words, General Kolling," stated General Ruppert. "The Alceans know every little detail of our invasion plans, and they have known about them for a long time."

"You traitors!" spat General Kolling as he noticed that the generals still carried their swords. "How could you sell out to the Alceans?"

"None of us sold out," declared General Somma. "The Alceans had months to prepare for our invasion, and they used that time wisely. Listen to Rut-ki, Kolling. She truly wants to save the lives of your men, not destroy them."

General Kolling opened his mouth to continue his tirade, but General Gertz gently touched his arm to halt his words.

"Let us hear what happened to the other teams," General Gertz suggested.

The rage fell from General Kolling's face, and Rut-ki let out an inaudible sigh.

"I will leave you to talk among yourselves," Rut-ki said softly. "I will remind my three captives that I do not accept surrender a second time."

The Knight of Alcea turned and walked away from the tent.

"What was that supposed to mean?" scowled General Kolling.

"She was warning us not to attempt to rejoin the war by returning to the 9th Corps with you," answered General Hanold. "We have surrendered and the Alceans have accepted our surrender. To go back on that agreement would be dishonorable."

"Dishonorable?" recoiled General Kolling. "You have weapons and horses. To refuse your sworn duty to the Federation would be dishonorable."

"These people have true honor, Kolling," scowled General Somma. "They do not use the word as a ploy to get something they want. You would be wise to deal with them honorably, no matter what you eventually decide is the correct path for the 9th Corps."

"Where is General Franz?" asked General Gertz. "What happened to your teams?"

“Franz is dead,” answered General Somma. “The Alceans built a dam since our scouts were here last fall. They destroyed it when the 4th Corps and 18th Corps were most vulnerable. The flood ruined our armies in an instant. We lost five-thousand men before it was over, but we would have lost three times that if the Alceans had not rescued the survivors.”

“Even if you only had a quarter of your men left,” retorted General Kolling, “you could have fought on.”

“We could have,” replied General Somma, “for maybe a few minutes at most. The Alceans had the river lined with archers. Our men had to toss their swords and shields just to stay afloat. There was no possible contest, Gertz. They had us, and they had us good. I am grateful that the Alceans saved as many of our men as they did. If that means that I remain their prisoner, so be it. I will not dishonor my surrender.”

“Then you will hang as a traitor when I take Ongchi,” warned General Kolling.

“Then I will hang,” shrugged General Somma. “I am not fearful of you, Kolling. One side or the other will wish me dead for the choices I have made, but I am at peace with my decisions. Fifteen-thousand young Zarans are alive today because I surrendered. The Alceans have promised to repatriate them, and I believe them. Besides, you will never take Ongchi, Kolling. I have seen what these Alceans are made of, and you will never survive long enough to march your army to Ongchi.”

“Ruppert?” General Gertz asked before General Kolling could respond to Somma’s statements. “What happened to Team Elmor?”

“The Alceans laid a trap for us,” answered the Ertakan general. “There is a section of the road between Elmor and Ongchi that runs along the base of a high cliff. The Alceans call it Hun-lo Heights. The Lanoirians ran a pipeline along that strip of road and sent oil down to cover several leagues of the road. They ignited it while our armies were on it. We had no choice but to leap into the sea. Even then we were not safe. They had enough oil to keep the road burning for days, and they had a huge navy bearing down on us with catapults. We had the choice of surrendering or dying.”

“Couldn’t you have fought your way out?” growled General Kolling. “Fighting is what armies do these days.”

“They had archers on the cliffs and on both ends of the trap,” replied General Ruppert. “They had almost as many men as we did, and they had every field advantage one could imagine. Fighting was not an option, Kolling, and don’t even try to call me a coward or a traitor. Had there been even a small sliver of hope, we would have fought, but we were not about to just throw away the lives of our

men. There was no point to it."

General Kolling frowned, not at Ruppert's justification, but rather at his description of the forces arrayed against them.

"How many men were against you, Somma?" he asked.

"Around five-thousand," the Spinoan general answered.

"And you, Ruppert?" asked General Kolling.

"Perhaps fifteen-thousand, but that is a rough estimate."

"That leaves nothing against us," General Kolling said quietly to General Gertz. "We are being harassed by a small insignificant group. I think it is time to finish them off. Let's get back to the column."

Without so much as a farewell, the two generals of Team Barouk turned and walked away. General Kolling untied the reins of the horse he had ridden to the parley and swung up onto the saddle, but the horse refused to turn at his command. The general growled under his breath and dug his spurs into the horse, but the result was far different than he had expected. The creature reared up in an attempt to dislodge its rider, but General Kolling hung on tightly. The beast brought its forelegs back to the ground and bucked severely. General Kolling was tossed to the ground, and the unicorn's horn suddenly appeared. The unicorn turned quickly and lowered its head, its sharp, spiraled horn pointing directly at the general's chest. General Kolling's eyes widened in disbelief as a voice sounded in his mind.

You ride by invitation only, Zaran, and no invitation has been offered. Should you ever repeat your vicious behavior, I will drag your body along the road until there is nothing left of it.

The Baroukan general stared up at the unicorn, fear and confusion distorting the features of his face.

"Perhaps it is better that you walk back to your column," Rut-ki said with a slight smile as she approached the group. "It will give you both time to reflect on my offer of food and safety for your men in return for their surrender."

General Gertz dropped the reins he had been holding as if they had suddenly burned his hand. General Kolling slowly slid backwards until the unicorn's horn was no longer threatening his chest. He rose and backed away, never taking his eyes off the unicorn. When the two generals had backed up to the protective squad, they turned and walked swiftly towards the column.

* * * *

Three humans and two elves stood in the middle of the Mya-Tagaret Road.

"This is where they will camp tonight," declared Prince Garong. "They have been setting up the tents in the middle of the road and spreading the camp out around them."

Alexander Tork turned slowly until he had completed an entire

circle. He nodded with satisfaction.

"What is your plan?" asked Princess Rhula. "Maybe we can aid you in some way."

"I have come to assassinate General Fortella," answered Alex. "Jenneva and Theos will be magically assisting me. I mean no offense to the Elderal, but I think it might be better if your people were not involved in this. Things are going to be very chaotic tonight, and it is always hard to predict what the enemy will do under such circumstances."

"We will not interfere," stated Prince Garong, "but we will not be far away, either. Why only General Fortella? Would it not be better to cut off the heads of both generals?"

"No." Alex shook his head. "Killing them both would allow a colonel to step up and seize command, and there are too many of them unknown to our people. We cannot risk uncertainty at this point. General Whitman is our preferred leader for Team Mya. He will not be killed."

"I am not so quick to refuse the help of the elves," stated Jenneva. "While they may not be able to infiltrate the camp as you can, Theos and I could use their protection. It will be nearly impossible for us to observe all portions of the camp at the same time, and our concentration will be needed to focus on small parts of it."

"Then protect you we will," Prince Garong said with a smile. "Where will you be when the chaos starts?"

"We are undecided," answered Jenneva. "We have looked at the area from the air, but we were unsure of the location of the tents. We will need a place with some elevation that affords us a view of as much of the camp as possible."

"And not too far away," interjected Theos as he nodded towards a hill to the north. "That hill is worth investigating."

"Let us go and investigate it," suggested Prince Garong. "The advance scouts will be arriving in a couple of hours. We will have to be prepared by then."

The two human mages and the elven Knight of Alcea mounted their unicorns and flew away, leaving the elven princess and Alex alone on the road.

"How will you enter the camp?" asked Princess Rhula.

"I won't enter it," Alex replied with a slight smile as he rummaged in his pack for the Federation uniform that he had used before. "I will already be here. My problem will be getting out. Excuse me while I change clothes."

Alex walked into the woods and returned wearing the uniform of a Federation colonel.

"Your insignia is wrong," stated the elf. "General Fortella heads

the 2nd Corps, not the 11th Corps."

"It is what I have available," frowned Alex. "I will have to hide the patch in some way or think of a reasonable excuse for it."

"There is time for me to pick off one of the soldiers of the 2nd Corps and bring you the patch," offered the eleven princess, "but you must decide immediately. The scouts arrive early and settle in to wait for the rest of the column."

Alex shook his head. "It will be dark. Blood will suffice to obscure the patch."

Princess Rhula raised an eyebrow. "Human blood?"

Alex chuckled and shook his head. "Neither human nor elven blood. Go slay me something that bleeds while I search for a good hiding spot."

"Go kill your own game," the elven princess replied with an uncharacteristic smile. "There is no one better than an elf to find you a hiding spot in the forest. I will pick you a good one."

Chapter 40

Fire in the Woods

Colonel Wu-sang peered over the ridge at the Federation column marching along the road between Barouk and Ongchi. Behind him, five-thousand Lanoirian troops waited in a cold camp.

“You made good time from Chi,” Rut-ki said softly.

“The men are eager to engage the enemy,” replied the Lanoirian colonel. “I think our victory over Team Chi has raised their spirits for the first time since they learned of the coming Zaran invasion. They insisted on force marching most of the way.”

Rut-ki frowned slightly. She was pleased by the boost in the men’s morale, but she was also concerned about them being overly confident.

“You must temper their enthusiasm,” stated the Knight of Alcea. “Our goal at the present is not one of full engagement. It is rather one of retreat.”

“Retreat?” questioned the colonel. “The enemy does not even know that we are here. I do not understand.”

“Then I shall explain it to you,” Rut-ki said with a sympathetic smile. “The purpose of this engagement is to stall the Federation’s advance towards Ongchi until General Za-hong can position his men. With that in mind, we will attack the rear of his column in the hope of getting his army to turn around and pursue us. If he does pursue us, we will tactically retreat, dragging them with us. That means that the retreat must be closely controlled to keep the enemy interested, yet clever enough to avoid serious loses to our men. If they disengage, we will advance and attack again until they do pursue us.”

“I understand.” The colonel nodded. “How long do we need to stall the enemy?”

“If we can delay them one day we will have accomplished all that could be asked of us,” answered the Knight of Alcea.

The Lanoirian colonel nodded and fell silent, his mind looking for pitfalls in the plan.

“If the rear of my column was attacked,” the colonel eventually said, “I would try to outflank the attackers. The Federation column is so long that we would never see them pulling forces out of it to attack us.”

“The fairies will keep watch for you,” promised Rut-ki. “Also, the enemy has no cavalry so their attack should not arrive without ample

notice. General Za-hong figured the best possible scenario is that the enemy divides the column in two, with one half attacking you, and the other half continuing on towards Ongchi. If General Kolling does that, Za-hong will destroy the first half of the column and then come to your aid."

"That is not a likely possibility," stated Colonel Wu-sang. "He will be more likely to rush our positions at the rear of his column. The retreat will have to be structured carefully to prevent offering such a temptation."

"I will leave that planning up to you," stated Rut-ki. "Elandros and his elves will be nearby. If it looks like you are in trouble, he will take action to ease the pressure on you."

"His people could fill my lines," offered the colonel. "We would be proud to have the elves among us."

"Adding a hundred archers to your line will not change much," replied Rut-ki. "Remember, we are not seeking to kill thousands of Zarans. We are seeking to delay the column. Elandros and his elves are better used as a roving force that can turn the head of the serpent should it become necessary."

* * * *

Colonel Ednor of the 9th Corps of the Empire of Barouk ran forward as fast as his legs could carry him. By the time he reached General Kolling and General Gertz, the colonel was out of breath. The two generals stepped out of the column and waited impatiently for the urgent message to be delivered.

"Out with it man," scowled General Kolling. "What is it?"

"Attack," gasped the colonel. "The rear of the column."

"That would be your stragglers, Gertz," General Kolling said dismissively. "It sounds like the band that has been sniping at our foragers is getting desperate. Perhaps you should go back and teach your men about proper defensive measures."

The Aertan general frowned at the thought of walking in the wrong direction. It would only lengthen the walk to the next camp if he had to cover the same ground twice.

"No," gasped the colonel. "It's bigger."

General Kolling's eyes narrowed with concern as his foot tapped the surface of the road. "How much bigger, Colonel?"

The colonel took a deep breath and straightened up. "There are thousands of Lanoirians behind us. They have engaged the rear of the column, and they do not seem willing to disengage. We have a battle on our hands, General."

"Thousands?" echoed the Baroukan general. "Where did they come from if all of the Lanoirian army is before us?"

"Evidently they are not all before us," retorted General Gertz.

“Could it be the army that attacked Franz and Somma up near Chi?”

“They should be days away,” frowned General Kolling.

“Days away from when they attacked Team Chi,” countered General Gertz. “We never did ask Somma when the attack had occurred. Team Chi came into the country on day six. That was five days ago and plenty of time for an army to march cross country, especially if they had horses.”

“But Somma said that the Lanoirians against him only had five-thousand men,” argued General Kolling. “What fool would attack this column with only five-thousand men?”

“One that wished to slow us down,” answered General Gertz. “Rut-ki made a point of mentioning our schedule. That means that she knows what it is. She seeks to delay us.”

“Delay us?” scoffed General Kolling. “For what purpose? If the other two teams are no longer fighting forces, our schedule means nothing. We have no one to meet up with. Ongchi is not going anywhere.”

“Maybe she suspects a fourth team?” shrugged the Aertan general. “I do not know her reasons for wanting to delay us, but it is the only thing that makes sense.”

“No.” General Kolling shook his head. “Rut-ki knew far too much about us. She knows what the invasion plans are. The delay has to do with something on her side of the equation. She needs time to prepare for our arrival at Ongchi.”

“The Lanoirian force from Hun-lo Heights?” posed general Gertz.

“That is what I am thinking,” nodded General Kolling. “Ongchi stands undefended right now. Instead of bringing their men down from Chi to defend the capital, they sent them to attack us. I am half tempted to force march our men and seize the city while it is undefended.”

“Half tempted?”

General Kolling sighed and shook his head. “The men are weak and weary. If I demanded a forced march right now, we would arrive with only half an army. If that.”

General Gertz nodded in agreement. “And we would have five-thousand Lanoirians behind us every step of the way. Arriving with half of our men might be a bit optimistic. What are the alternatives?”

“There are only two alternatives,” stated General Kolling. “We can form defensive ranks which will give the Lanoirians precisely the delay that they are looking for, or we can engage the enemy completely and annihilate one fourth of the Lanoirian army. I wonder if they have horses and supply wagons?”

“Those would be prizes well worth fighting for,” brightened General Gertz.

General Kolling nodded, seeming to have made his decision. “I think we will go on the offensive by pretending to be defensive. Colonel, get to the vanguard and halt the column. I want the vanguard to set up defensive positions where they are. They are to protect our eastern exposure. As companies reach the fortifications they are to deploy behind them with the earliest arrivals preparing for an offensive attack when the enemy gets near. We have a fish on the line, men. Let’s reel it in.”

* * * *

Rut-ki rode up the hill and dismounted near Elandros. She looked down on the body-strewn road and sighed with unease.

“I don’t like this, Elandros,” she said. “Something feels wrong about it.”

“A larger army running from a smaller one?” he posed. “I know you mean more than that, and I agree, but I cannot say exactly why it feels wrong.”

“Neither can I,” admitted Rut-ki, “but it does. The Federation hasn’t pushed back once all day. All they have done is build fortifications to hide behind.”

“Perhaps you should call off the attack,” replied the elf.

Rut-ki frowned. “I could demand that Colonel Wu-sang break off the attack, but I am hesitant to do so. The plan is General Za-hong’s plan, and his colonel is faithfully carrying it out. It is accomplishing exactly what Za-hong wants. If Team Barouk remains behind their fortifications, our people will gain the time they need to reach Ongchi first.”

“If they remain behind the fortifications,” echoed the elf. “I am concerned about that. Wu-sang’s men are getting tired while many of the Zarans are resting. I know you are hesitant to overrule the colonel, but I would if it were my decision to make.”

Rut-ki nodded in agreement and woke up her fairy.

“Shall I go spy on the enemy again?” chirped Speck.

“No,” smiled Rut-ki. “Find Colonel Wu-sang. Tell him to break off the fight and retreat in an orderly manner.”

The fairy shot up into the sky and disappeared. Moments later, Speck landed on the colonel’s shoulder.

“Rut-ki says to break off the fight and retreat in an orderly manner,” the fairy dutifully repeated.

The Lanoirian colonel nodded as his eyes scanned the battlefield. The Zarans were only putting up a token resistance as the Lanoirian forces chased them along the road and through the woods. He sighed with satisfaction. The battle had gone well for the Lanoirians. He was proud of his men. He looked around for runners and saw two men standing nearby. He waved them to him.

“One of you take the north side of the road, and the other take the south. We are breaking off the attack and retreating as we had planned to do earlier. Carry my words forward to the front lines and be quick about it.”

The two men saluted and dashed off in opposite directions. The man on the north side of the road raced through the trees, seeking the most forward commander, but he never found him. As he approached the front lines, an arrow pierced his neck, his body tumbling to the ground unnoticed. The right flank continued to press the attack while the left flank began their retreat. The Zarans, seeing the confusion, chose that moment to attack.

Thousands of Federation soldiers leaped over the crude barricade and charged the Lanoirians. Other Federation units swept wide around the barricades intending to outflank the Lanoirians. Within mere minutes the controlled Lanoirian advance turned into a full-fledged rout. With the withdrawal of the Lanoirian’s left flank, the Federation soldiers ordered to go against it instead turned towards the stationary right flank and engulfed it.

Colonel Wu-sang watched in horror as the tides of battle changed against him. He dispatched runners as quickly as he could find them in an attempt to lessen his loses, but there was little he could do. The cavalry was brought into the battle, but they were only effective on the road portion of the battlefield. They did manage to shield the left flank and allow them to organize their retreat, but they were useless against the wooded battle occurring on the right flank.

Elandros and his elves swept into the forest towards the encircled right flank, but even their excellent archers could not extricate the Lanoirian soldiers. All they could do was whittle down the number of Zarans killing the trapped Lanoirians. Rut-ki took to the sky on her unicorn and flew over the battlefield. While it was hard to see through the canopy, she dropped small jars of fire glue whenever she saw large knots of Federation soldiers. Eventually the forest began to burn, and the Zarans retreated to their barricades, leaving the wounded and dying behind.

Colonel Wu-sang organized groups of men to brave the fires, rescuing what wounded they could find, regardless of uniform. As dusk arrived, the remnants of the Lanoirian army made camp a league east of the Federation camp. When the final tally was made, the Lanoirian army was short two-thousand men. Another one-thousand men were wounded. It had been a bloody day, and the mood of the camp showed it. As the camp finally settled down to sleep, three people remained around one of the fires.

“I guess I made a mess of it today,” lamented Colonel Wu-sang. “I have no right to hold my rank.”

“We Lanoirians are not the only ones capable of setting traps,” replied Rut-ki. “Besides, I am as much at fault as you are. It felt wrong to me far before I sent Speck to tell you to disengage. I should have acted sooner.”

“The two of you need to stop beating yourselves,” advised Elandros. “The trap was well set and sprung. No one can foretell what the enemy might do. The important thing is you both acted quickly to lessen the loss. If you, Rut-ki, had not started those fires, all of the men we pulled out would have died. And you, Wu-sang, your quick thinking and disciplined order allowed us to extricate the wounded before they died. Stop dwelling on the mistakes and concentrate on the future.”

“The future?” scoffed Colonel Wu-sang. “What future? I have only two-thousand men left, and I am supposed to stall the Federation march to Ongchi. How can I do that?”

“The Federation army was also bloodied today,” Elandros pointed out. “Their morale will not be any higher than ours, but they have no options open to them. They have to continue their long march towards Ongchi, and now they know that such a march will not be pleasant. They will be more wary than ever before. If you use your remaining men well, you can have a great impact on that Federation column.”

“He is right, Wu-sang,” brightened Rut-ki. “Elandros has been attacking them for over a week with only one-hundred men. We just need to be smarter in how we attack them.”

The Lanoirian colonel raised an eyebrow at the thought. “The men would look forward to bloodying the Federation again. What did you have in mind?”

* * * *

Four guards stood outside the large command tent of Team Mya. When balls of fire started streaming through the sky, they all turned towards the north and watched excitedly. While they were not close enough to the northern perimeter to see the magical projectiles strike, the shouts and screams attested to the attack. General Fortella burst from the tent, his attention immediately drawn to the magical spectacle as the darkness of the camp was shattered by the glow of fires in the distance.

“One of you find Colonel Tamora and have him report here immediately,” commanded the general.

One of the four guards took off running. The general stood watching the spectacle for several minutes before Colonel Tamora appeared with the fourth guard. The general turned and entered the tent, and Colonel Tamora followed him inside. Moments later, Colonel Tamora reappeared and ran in the direction of the disturbance. The general did not reappear outside the tent.

“I would not want to be under those falling balls of fire,” one of the guards said softly. “That is no way to die.”

Suddenly, the sound of a distant explosion shook the camp, and one giant tree screeched as if slid against another before slamming into the ground. The guards shuddered.

“There are things worse than death,” one of the other guards murmured. “The wounded will be left behind to die slowly.”

As the four guards stared off into the distance, a colonel ran towards the tent from the north. He halted at the edge of the road and stopped a passing captain. The guards could not hear the words, but they saw the colonel pointing excitedly towards the north. The colonel then pointed directly at the large command tent and then back to the north. The captain nodded and ran off towards the commotion. The colonel turned and strode briskly towards the large command tent. As he neared the tent flap, the guards noticed the blood on the side of his head, and his sleeve from the shoulder to the elbow was drenched with blood. The colonel whisked past them and into the tent.

“Who was he?” one of the guards asked softly. “I did not recognize him.”

“I doubt that his own mother would recognize him right now,” replied one of the other guards. “He has shed a lot of blood this night. Things do not seem to be going too good at the perimeter.”

Inside the large command tent, General Fortella looked up to see who had entered the tent. His brow creased in confusion just before the Lanoirian star slammed into it. The general’s eyes rolled up into his head as his body toppled to the ground. The bloody colonel had no need to check for signs of life. He pivoted towards the flap and reversed course.

”I will see to it, General,” he said loudly as pushed his way out of the tent.

As the assassin exited the tent, numbers were methodically flowing through his mind. The task had been accomplished much quicker than he had anticipated, and that meant that he had time to waste before he executed his escape. A sudden thought passed through his mind, and he turned abruptly towards the smaller command tent.

Only two guards manned the smaller tent, and even though they were also watching the fiery missiles, they caught sight of the bloody colonel coming towards them from the larger tent. One of the guards frowned as he gazed at the approaching colonel. He stiffened and his mouth opened to challenge the officer, but the colonel spoke before he uttered a sound.

“I want this guard detail doubled immediately,” the colonel ordered brusquely, “and start paying more attention to this area of the camp instead of gazing at things that do not pertain to your task. This

camp might come under full attack at any moment, and you stand gazing at the sky. Get more men here immediately."

The two guards glanced at each other anxiously as the colonel strode between them and into the smaller command tent. Unlike the alert General Fortella, General Whitman was resting on a cot in a dark corner of the tent. Alex strode across the tent without drawing the attention of the general, but when he drew his sword, the general opened his eyes wide. Alex placed the tip of his sword at the general's throat.

"I am not here to kill you this night," Alex said softly, "but that night might yet come. You are the leader of Force Targa now. I think you need to dwell seriously on surrendering to the Alceans. It is the only way that you will survive this war."

"Who are you?" croaked the general.

"Some call me Colonel Belasko," Alex replied with a thin smile, "but you should think of things more important than my name. Your colonels will balk at surrendering because they do not know how pitifully the invasion is going. Your task is to seize control of this team and surrender it before the walls of Tagaret. Failure to do so will result in your entire team being destroyed, including yourself. Close your eyes now."

The general closed his eyes, but his body shuddered uncontrollably. Alex woke his fairy and signaled for a sleep spell. Bitsy silently complied, and the general's body fell still.

"Back into hiding," Alex whispered. "We still have to get out of here."

Bitsy climbed back into her pocket, and Alex sheathed his sword. Still counting numbers in his head, Alex quickened his step as he exited the tent. Without acknowledging the guards, he turned and headed towards the northern perimeter. He had not gotten very far from the road when he heard the shouts of treachery behind him. Someone had discovered the body of General Fortella. Alex broke into a run and raced for the perimeter.

Alex reached the northern perimeter area well before his appointed time. Fiery projectiles still rained down upon the encampment, and the area bordering the target zone was one of chaos and confusion. Brush fires ran rampant, and large trees, destroyed by tree mines, crisscrossed the ground, making an obstacle course out of the camp. Moans of the wounded and shouts of others created an audible jumble of sounds that added to the confusion. Some of the able soldiers were trying to evacuate the wounded, but others huddled behind trees for safety.

The plan had been for Alex to wait for a period of time when the magical assault on the camp would stop completely, giving him a safe

window of opportunity to move through the target zone before the assault started anew, but the early discovery of General Fortella's body demanded swifter action. He halted at the edge of the target zone and glanced around. The ground ahead was a land of total devastation. Nothing moved in the area except the smoke drifting up from the charred ground. Every couple of seconds, another fireball flew through the sky and impacted in a dazzling display of fire. The spells were no longer threatening the Federation army as everyone in the target zone was already dead, but no one seemed to be questioning why the mages were not changing the trajectories of their spells.

Anxiously waiting for the numbers to fall into place, Alex kept to the shadows at the edge of the target zone, but his time for waiting soon ended. Soldiers raced into the area looking for a bloody colonel, and Alex knew that he could not afford to wait for the lull in spells. He broke from the shadows and raced into the devastated area just as someone pointed to him and shouted to the others. As the Knight of Alcea ran across the blighted area, he caught sight of a quickly growing brilliance out of the corner of his eye. He dove forward, curling his body into a ball as the ground exploded behind him. As he rose to his feet and began running again, Federation arrows stabbed the ground on both sides of him. He sacrificed a bit of speed as he began to waver his path of escape. Another ball of fire slammed into the ground behind him, and he heard screams of pain as the fire consumed some of his pursuers. As Alex neared the relative safety of green forest, he felt an arrow whiz past his face. The arrow had come from in front of him, and he heard a gurgle of death behind him. He dove for the bushes before him.

"Hurry," the female voice urged him, "but be silent. There are patrols out here searching for the mages."

Alex rose to his feet and saw Princess Rhula let another arrow fly. He turned to see the last of his pursuers fall to the ground.

"I am indebted," Alex said to the elven princess.

"So you are," grinned Princess Rhula. "Send your fairy to the mages. There is no point in them risking capture now that you are no longer in the camp. Garong will aid their retreat."

Chapter 41

Day Twelve

The Coastal Highway north of Trekum was a well-traveled road that passed through stands of forest and patches of grassland. Its broad expanse rolled over gentle hills and crossed valleys both broad and narrow. Along its wide surface, the 10th Corps cavalry rode three abreast followed by six files of infantry. Behind the 10th Corps of Ertak, the 22nd Corps of Spino waited in camp for their turn to head south. When fully assembled, Team Caldar would stretch for over two leagues in length, and that was an inviting target for the nomadic horsemen of Sordoa.

As the sun rose over the Sordoan Sea on the twelfth day of the Zaran invasion, sunlight glinted off the swords and shields of Sordoan horsemen who occupied the western end of a broad grassy valley which was bordered by forests on both sides. Shouts of alarm rippled through the ranks of the 10th Corps, and the infantry section that was crossing the valley immediately halted and pivoted towards the enemy. The first rank dropped to one knee and raised their shields. The second rank stood and raised their shields, while the other four ranks prepared their bows. The shield bearers drew their swords and waited for the attack. They did not have long to wait.

One-thousand Sordoan horsemen charged from the far western end of the valley, their war cries loud and reverberating. The sunlight danced off their shields sending blinding rays of sunlight into the faces of the Zarans, but the archers were unmoved. They glanced down to avoid the light and waited for the enemy to come within range. The sound of the galloping horses thundered and the ground rumbled increasingly as the horses drew closer. Zaran arrows were nocked as men in the first rank called out the distance of the approaching horde. Bows were raised high for an early strike, and squad leaders started counting down to zero.

Unexpectedly, the Sordoans turned in a well-practiced maneuver. Zaran arrows flew through the sky, but the Sordoans were no longer charging. With long crisscrossing sweeps from side-to-side, the Sordoan horsemen reversed course and began galloping away, yet the thunder and pounding did not diminish. The Zaran archers nocked arrows again, ready for another reversal that would bring the Sordoans back into range. It never happened.

Even as the Sordoans galloped away from the column, the

thunder and rumbling increased. Eventually, one of the Federation soldiers turned around and saw the real threat. Charging out of the sun from the eastern end of the valley were thousands of Sordoan horsemen, the noise of their advance covered up by the charge from the west. They were already too close for the Zarans to reform their defensive line. Some of the closest Zarans dropped to one knee and tried to raise their shields as they had been taught, but others fired their arrows into the sun, hoping to score a blind hit. The Sordoans used their horse bows for three shots each before releasing their bows to hang on saddle tethers. They drew their swords as they surged into the Federation line and cut their way through to the other side.

The battle was over almost as soon as it began. The Sordoan horsemen continued heading westward after they rode through the Federation column, leaving thousands of Federation bodies in their wake.

The Federation column remained unmoving long after the Sordoans were gone. Soldiers filed into the valley searching for men that were wounded and trying to patch them up as best they could. An eerie quiet pervaded the battlefield, the soldiers speaking in hushed tones as if raising a voice would anger the gods.

Eventually, General Omirro arrived on the battlefield. He surveyed the carnage and immediately summoned runners to him. He issued orders for cavalry units to maintain a presence in all open fields until the infantry had safely passed back into the woods and then he ordered the column to start moving again. The soldiers grumbled about leaving their dead and wounded behind, but not loud enough for the general to hear. Everyone knew that he was in a foul mood, and no one wanted to risk his ire.

A couple of hours later, the vanguard of the 22nd Corps of Spino reached the battlefield. General Barbone and Colonel Pineta moved out of the vanguard and halted to survey the damage. For several minutes, neither of them spoke as their eyes scanned the bodies. Piles of the dead had been dragged off the road to avoid obstructing the column, and the piles resembled berms lining the road. General Barbone grimaced at the sight.

“I heard the report the same as you did,” the general said solemnly, “but I cannot imagine what took place here today. Omirro keeps treating these Sordoans as if they were docile Dielderal, but I think he is wrong.”

“I do not see many Sordoans among the dead,” commented the colonel.

General Barbone rose up in his saddle and gazed left and right. He sat back down and sighed. “Nor do I, Colonel. The famed impenetrable line of the 10th Corps did not hold too well against the

Sordoans."

"The sight of this carnage will be upsetting to the men, General. It is already hard to maintain morale without decent food."

"I agree," replied the general. "Call a halt to the column and have the vanguard take care of the bodies. I will not have my army march through this."

"General Omirro will be livid if we halt the column," warned the colonel.

"Blast Omirro," snapped the general. "Carry out my orders."

The colonel saluted silently and rode off to issue the orders. General Barbone rode further into the valley, gazing upon the dead and avoiding the hateful glares of the wounded who were being left behind to fend for themselves. As he rode around the valley, he saw a lone horseman in the distance. He squinted towards the western end of the valley and recognized the bald governor. His first thought was about the audacity of the Sordoan sitting there gloating over his handiwork, but something tugged on the general's mind. The Sordoan's face held no grin. Curious, the general rode towards the Sordoan, and the governor rode towards him. When they reached a distance of one-hundred paces, the Spinoan general halted.

"Come to gloat?" he shouted.

The Sordoan continued approaching until he was within talking distance.

"What is there to gloat over?" asked Governor Mobami. "Good men died on both sides today. Should I gloat because more of the dead were yours? I asked for your surrender to avoid scenes such as this, but if blood must stain Sordoan soil, I prefer it to be Federation blood."

The general nodded, feeling awkward talking to the enemy without a flag of truce. "You will not be able to repeat such a feat," stated the general. "You realize that, don't you?"

"There are many ways to defeat an enemy," shrugged Governor Mobami. "This is my land and I know it well. I need not rely on any single tactic. I know that you think my words are boastful, but you will learn the truth eventually. I only hope that you see the truth before all of your men are dead."

"Like the men of Gattas and Ritka?" retorted the general.

"Ritka's men are not dead," replied the governor. "Only he is. General Stemple surrendered all of Team Gortha after Ritka died. As for Gattas and Montero, the truth has already been told to you. I cannot force you to believe it."

General Barbone gazed into the Sordoan's eyes as if trying to gauge the amount of truth in the words spoken. He sighed anxiously and looked away.

“What would you do if we did surrender?” asked the general.

“We already have camps set up for your men,” answered the governor. “They will be fed and cared for until the end of hostilities. When the war is over, they will be sent back to their homes.”

“That is just unbelievable,” frowned the general. “No one treats a conquered enemy that way. More likely, you will enslave my men. I give you credit for making such statements with a believable tone, but your words are absurd.”

“You truly do not know your enemy, General,” the governor said without malice. “I am a Sordoan, subjugated by the Alcean king. Do I look enslaved to you? In my early days as a soldier, words such as mine would have been unbelievable to my ears as well, so I know what you are thinking, but you do not understand King Arik. He has made loyal subjects out of all of his enemies.”

“I cannot imagine such a thing,” the general said with a shake of his head. “It is outlandish.”

“I know,” smiled the general, “but he is an outlandish king. I remember the day I first met him. I was defending Trekum against an army of one-hundred-thousand Lanoirians. They had us in a siege and there was no escape from it. King Arik rode into the city to speak to me. I laughed when he told me who he was, because the story was so outlandish, but he proved it to me. I have never doubted his word since.”

“I know of no king whose word can be trusted,” retorted General Barbone. “I only believe in what I can see and feel. When you can prove your words, we will talk again.”

“If proof is what you need,” shrugged the governor, “then proof you shall have. Will it make a difference if you learn the true fate of the other teams? Will you surrender then?”

“General Omirro is team leader,” replied General Barbone. “It is his decision to surrender or fight.”

“Do the lives of the men of the 22nd Corps not matter to you? Do you consign their fate to the whims of an Ertakan?”

“That is harsh,” scowled the general. “My men matter a great deal to me, but I am only a participant in a team effort. It is Omirro who leads this team.”

“You are a general of an army,” countered the governor, “and you are responsible for the welfare of your men. That is not a responsibility that you can consign to others, whether it be a team leader or even a king. If you are not prepared to stand for them, you should resign and let them be led by one who will stand for them.”

The governor turned his horse and rode away. General Barbone watched him leave, a frown clouding the Spinoan’s face. He felt as if his father had just given him a stern lecture, yet the Sordoan was no

older than the general was. He shook his head and turned his horse to return to his troops.

* * * *

Four arrows streaked out of the trees alongside the Barouk-Ongchi Road, and four Federation soldiers of the 25th Corps of Aerta fell to the ground. Howls of outrage sounded throughout the column, and a Federation captain disobeyed his orders.

"Kill them!" shouted the captain as he raised his sword and charged into the woods.

The entire company followed their captain, although many of the men were weary and afraid. One-hundred soldiers ran into the forest, shouts of revenge ripping from their throats. The shouted war cries only helped to cover the sounds of snapping bowstrings as the Lanoirians fired without mercy. Within seconds the shouting died, replaced with the moans of the wounded.

Colonel Potter of the 25th Corps raced along the road and halted in the gap in the column created by the absence of an entire company. He gazed into the forest and shook his head in disgust. The captain of the next company in the column halted when he reached the colonel. The colonel turned and glared at him.

"How many times must I tell you not to leave the road?" he bellowed.

"My company is still here," retorted the captain, "but just barely. The men will not stand for being used as targets, Colonel. If they are going to die, they want to at least engage the enemy."

"And die like them?" the colonel shouted as he pointed towards the woods. "The Lanoirians are trying to get us to do exactly what that fool did. The next captain that defies my orders will die by my own sword."

The captain opened his mouth to retort, but the colonel's rage made him think better of speaking his mind.

"And close up the gap in the column," shouted the colonel.

Colonel Potter stepped off the road to let the column pass by. He stared into the woods, hoping to see some of the ambushed men straggle out of the trees. After a while, he sighed with despair as the forest remained silent. With determination, he turned and started running towards the front of the column. As he passed by the column, he sharply reminded each captain of the need to stay on the road. Eventually he reached the vanguard of the 25th Corps, but General Gertz was not there. He was informed that the general had gone forward to speak with General Kolling. Colonel Potter continued forward. Eventually, he ran into Colonel Ednor of the 9th Corps of the Empire of Barouk. The Baroukan colonel looked at his Aertan counterpart and frowned. He waved Colonel Potter to his side and

urged him to walk for a while.

"What brings you forward?" asked Colonel Ednor.

"The Lanoirian sniping," answered Colonel Potter. "We just lost another company. Something must be done about it."

"Another company?" questioned the Baroukan colonel. "Are the Lanoirians staging attacks on the column?"

"They are sniping the column," answered Colonel Potter. "They are trying to provoke a reaction, and they are succeeding. I have lost two companies already, and the rest of the men are ready to surge into the forest at the slightest provocation. The snipers must be killed."

"General Kolling remains adamant on the subject," replied Colonel Ednor. "We are to ignore the sniping."

"It cannot be ignored," Colonel Potter scowled, his voice rising in anger. "The men are being killed as they march along the road. Doesn't the general know what that can do to morale? It is the mentality of retreat. The men feel as if we are a broken army."

Colonel Ednor sighed and nodded. "I understand," he said calmly, "but the Lanoirians seek to delay us. The city of Ongchi stands before us, undefended. General Kolling is determined to seize the city before the Lanoirians can rally to defend it. If that means losing a few men to sniping, it is a small price to pay."

"Unless you are one of those men," spat the Aertan colonel. "Perhaps if it were your companies falling to their deaths you might look at things differently, but that is not the case. It is Aertans dying to the snipers, not Baroukans. If you will excuse me, I need to speak to General Gertz."

The Aertan colonel ran forward. Colonel Ednor frowned as he watched his fellow officer leave, the man's departing words bouncing through his mind. He wondered if the Lanoirians were clever enough to concentrate their attacks on the Aertans simply to feed a rivalry that already existed between the two Zaran nations. With that thought in his mind, he started running after the Aertan colonel. When they eventually reached the generals, they found them in the vanguard, which had halted at the edge of a large, open valley.

Colonel Ednor was puzzled by the halt in the column. He gazed down into the valley and saw nothing alarming. As his eyes followed the road up the opposite hill, he saw mounds of dirt indicative of trenches just below the ridge. He nodded in understanding as he walked over to where the generals were talking.

"We need to know their strength before attacking," stated General Gertz. "We have no idea what we are facing."

"We are facing the remnants of the small force that attacked our rear," scoffed General Kolling. "There can't be more than a thousand

of them up there. This is another of their feeble attempts to slow us down. We will smash our way through their crude defenses and march over their corpses. They will not slow this army down."

"They are already slowing us down," countered General Gertz. "This column is stopped. By the time the rear gathers here for the attack, we will have lost half a day."

"I do not need the Aertans to break through this rabble of an army," scowled General Kolling. "Your men can continue to leisurely stroll along the road."

"Leisurely stroll along the road?" Colonel Potter echoed with outrage. "We Aertans are dying while you Baroukans march in safety."

General Kolling whirled angrily towards the Aertan colonel.

"If you can't control your men under march, Colonel," scowled the Baroukan general, "then General Gertz ought to replace you with someone who can. The loss of a few men is insignificant in the grand scheme of things."

"I am not talking about a few men," retorted Colonel Potter. "We have lost over three-hundred men today to snipers, and the day isn't even half over."

General Kolling turned to General Gertz, his face red with rage. "Handle your men, Gertz," he snapped. "I do not have time for petty grievances."

The Baroukan general walked away from the Aertans, signaling for Colonel Ednor to follow him. The colonel promptly obeyed and the two officers stood on the ridgeline in the center of the road.

"The main prong of the attack will be straight up the road," declared General Kolling. "I want eight regiments to race across the valley and overwhelm the trenches. The other two regiments are to outflank the enemy, one to the north and one to the south. I want this battle over as quickly as possible."

"You were serious then about leaving the Aertans out of this?" inquired Colonel Ednor.

"I am serious," replied the general. "I cannot tolerate the whining of the Aertans. They think going to war should be as safe as marching along the roads of the Federation. Well that is not how life is. Besides, we do not need them for this. Let Gertz spend some time with his men teaching them about the realities of war. Before he is done with his speech, we will be on the other side of those trenches resuming the march to Ongchi."

* * * *

Above and beyond the trench that General Kolling was planning to attack, the remnants of Colonel Wu-sang's Lanoirian army prepared for a defiant stand. Determined to block the Federation's drive to Ongchi, the volunteers vowed to fight to the death.

Rut-ki stood in the forest gazing at the back side of a huge ring of abatis. The tall trees had been felled with precision, with their dense branches facing outward. The resulting bulwarks presented an impenetrable fortress just back from the ridge and unseen from the opposite hill. Just beneath where she was standing was a crude tunnel, and she quickly glanced in its direction as a man came crawling through it.

"We are through," announced the Lanoirian soldier.

Colonel Wu-sang came running from where he had been informing his men about the plan. He halted alongside Rut-ki and watched the soldier rise from the dirt.

"Is it wide enough for even the largest man?" asked the colonel.

"It will do," answered the soldier. "It will be a tight fit, and the going will be slow, but the men should be able to make it through if they have time to enter the tunnel."

"Time will be short," frowned Rut-ki. "You must know that all of the men will not survive. A lone tunnel will not allow enough time for them to escape."

"The men know this," nodded the colonel. "Those manning the trench volunteered for the duty, and they did so when they thought the tunnel would not even be completed in time. They are determined to avenge the deaths of their comrades and prevent the enemy from reaching Ongchi."

The Knight of Alcea nodded sadly. "What about the Federation flankers?"

"We do not have enough men to defend against both flanking movements, but we can harass them. Elandros and his elves will take the northern flank and our cavalry will take the southern flank. The rest is up to the gods."

"May they smile upon us," Rut-ki replied solemnly. "The Battle of Lizard Hill will be a bloody landmark in the history of Alcea. Let us hope that it buys General Za-hong the time he needs."

* * * *

The Federation armies of Team Mya remained in camp even as the sun climbed high in the sky. Inside the large command tent, the ten colonels of the 2nd Corps of the Empire of Barouk gathered to mark the passing of General Fortella. The mood was one of anger, not only for the death of the Baroukan general, but also for the hesitancy of General Whitman to break camp.

"He isn't holding camp to mourn General Fortella," complained one of the colonels. "He is afraid to march on Tagaret."

"I heard that the assassin entered Whitman's tent," added another colonel. "Why is he still alive?"

"Maybe the assassin worked for Whitman," another colonel

proposed with a scowl.

"That is nonsense," declared Colonel Tamora. "Whitman is holding camp because he is afraid to engage the Alceans. We all have heard the stories of the Aertan's cowardice. We do not need to look for conspiracies to understand his fear of breaking camp."

"Well," replied a colonel, "there is a surefire way to break that logjam. One of us needs to be elevated in rank to replace General Fortella. Whitman will have to fall in line then."

"There is no precedent for colonels deciding who is to become general," stated Colonel Tamora. "That is for Grand General Kyrga to decide."

"There is no precedent for Baroukans serving under an Aertan general, either," scowled one of the colonels. "We cannot expect Grand General Kyrga to come to Alcea to promote one of us. The leadership of the 2nd Corps is in our hands. Now, we can all squabble over who should get the promotion, but I think we need to be united in this, otherwise, General Whitman will object. As much as I want to be general, just like the rest of you, I think it is safe to say that General Fortella had been grooming Tamora for the promotion. I am willing to accept that. What say the rest of you?"

There were murmurs and grumbles for a few minutes, but the colonels eventually nodded in agreement. Colonel Tamora was congratulated and sent to confront General Whitman. He marched out of the large command tent and into the smaller one. The Aertan general looked up anxiously as the Baroukan colonel entered the tent, almost as if he knew the reason for the visit.

"I am assuming command of the 2nd Corps," Colonel Tamora announced.

"You have no authority to do so," replied General Whitman. "With the death of General Fortella, I am now the leader of Team Mya and Force Targa. The 2nd Corps will fall under my command."

"The 2nd Corps is Baroukan," argued the colonel. "We are to be led by one of our countrymen. The other colonels selected me for the promotion."

"Selected you?" scoffed the general. "Colonels do not select their generals any more than they can select which orders to obey. You are a member of Team Mya, and as such, you are under my command. You will hold whatever rank I determine you are capable of holding, and you will execute whatever orders I give you. To do otherwise is mutiny, and we both know the punishment for such an offense. Have I made myself clear, Colonel?"

"You have made your views known, General," snapped the colonel, "but the 2nd Corps is not going to stand around this encampment and wait for the Alcean armies to arrive. Team Mya was

tasked to attack Tagaret. Why are we not doing so?"

"You will not question my orders again, Colonel," the general said threateningly. "This team will move when I order it to do so. You are dismissed."

The colonel opened his mouth to speak, but the general rose to his feet and angrily pointed towards the tent flap.

"Dismissed!" General Whitman bellowed.

Colonel Tamora pivoted and marched out of the tent. He stormed into the large command tent and told the assembled colonels what had transpired.

"That is unacceptable," snarled one of the colonels. "I will not be led by an Aertan, and I will not be led by a coward."

"You are repeating yourself," one of the colonels said with a mischievous grin as he held out his fist. In his fist were ten splinters of wood, but only the ends were visible. "I expected such a response, and our path is quite clear to me. The short splinter gets the pleasure of killing the cowardly Aertan."

Chapter 42

Lizard Hill

The hill got its name from the locals who thought it looked like a giant lizard. The ridgeline of Lizard Hill was long and narrow with the tail end tapering off to the south. The northern extreme of the hill had a slight notch in the ridgeline, which separated a small portion of the hill from the larger part of it. The small portion was dubbed the head, and the notch was called the neck. The ridges of the head and the body of Lizard Hill were well forested, but the neck was treeless. The slopes of Lizard Hill, like most of the hills in the area, were bare, a testament to the erosion-prone terrain. A small trench ran half the length of the body just below the ridgeline with the road bisecting it, and it was on that trench that the Federation focused their efforts. At the sound of a whistle, eight thousand Federation soldiers poured out of the trees and ran down the hillside and into the valley. Across the valley, the Lanoirians watched anxiously as the valley began filling with red uniforms.

Tzu-chan was the best archer under the command of Colonel Wu-sang, and he had been chosen to start the defense of Lizard Hill. None of the other Lanoirians would fire their arrows until Tzu-chan had fired one first. From the center of the long trench, Tzu-chan watched the approaching horde without emotion. As the Zarans spread out in the valley and approached the base of Lizard Hill's slope, Tzu-chan strung his bow and pulled a handful of arrows out of his quiver. He calmly planted the arrows on the top of the trench wall and chose one to start the defense. He mechanically nocked the arrow as he watched the enemy's progress. When the first of the Zaran invaders reached the limit of Tzu-chan's range, the Lanoirian archer pulled back his arrow and let it fly. The arrow sailed downward and caught a Zaran firmly in the chest, the red-clad soldier falling backward and tumbling down the hill into those charging up the hill behind him. Within seconds, hundreds of arrows flew from the trench and rained down upon the Federation soldiers. The red-clad bodies flowed down the slope just like the mud did in the rainy season, but the Zarans were too numerous. The Federation soldiers leaped over the bodies tumbling down the hillside and continued their assault up the side of the hill. Within mere minutes, it became obvious that the Zarans would easily overrun the Lanoirian trench. There were just too many of them for the Lanoirians to keep them at bay.

“From the ends,” shouted Tzu-chan. “Now!”

From each end of the trench works, a Lanoirian archer unstrung his bow and hurried towards the center. When the two men reached Tzu-chan, they dropped to their knees. One of them entered the small tunnel, while the other waited his turn.

“Next!” shouted Tzu-chan as he let fly another arrow.

Two more men hurried towards the tunnel, while the rest of the Lanoirians continued to fire at the ever-closer enemy. Tzu-chan continued to shout for men to come towards the tunnel so that there was only one man waiting to enter it at any given moment. Eventually, the Zarans gained entry to the ends of the trench and began flowing towards the center. The Lanoirian archers then had to divide their time between those still climbing the hill and those coming along the trench. It was a sign that the trench had outlived its usefulness. The true purpose of the trench had been to trick the Zarans into engaging in battle by making them think their victory would be quick and easy. It was also meant to give the Lanoirians a chance to bloody the enemy. It had accomplished both goals.

“Those with children come now!” shouted Tzu-chan.

Only a dozen of the one-hundred men left in the trench hurried towards the center. The rest of the men slowly closed ranks, conceding the rest of the trench to the enemy. When Tzu-chan saw the last of the twelve men waiting his turn to enter the tunnel, he shouted out, “Next!”

Two more Lanoirians unstrung their bows and hurried towards the tunnel. Tzu-chan gritted his teeth as the Zarans reached the edge the trench. As one of the chosen men entered the tunnel, Tzu-chan ducked down and spoke quickly to the man waiting his turn.

“You are the last,” he said. “Seal the tunnel after you get through. Be quick about it. The end is here.”

Without waiting for an acknowledgement, Tzu-chan rose again, automatically nocking an arrow as he did. He released the arrow directly into the face of a Federation soldier climbing over the berm. All around him he heard the cries of pain, not only from the Zaran invaders, but also from his own men. He quickly nocked another arrow, but he never got to pull it back. A Zaran sword sliced into his side, and Tzu-chan’s world turned black.

* * * *

Far to the south, one-thousand Federation soldiers slipped out of the woods and headed across the valley towards the tail of Lizard Hill, hoping to secretly outflank the Lanoirians. They were halfway across the valley floor when three-hundred Lanoirian cavalrymen charged towards them. The counterattack was unexpected, and the Federation soldiers reacted in confusion. Some of the Zarans frantically sought to

string their bows while others turned and ran back towards the trees. Still others drew their swords and prepared to defend themselves against the horsemen.

The Lanoirians ignored those fleeing the battlefield and concentrated on the potential archers, while trying to avoid those prepared to defend the column. Their first run through the line was devastating, a trail of Federation bodies marking their path, but the Zarans recovered quickly. As the horsemen turned for another run, the Federation soldiers quickly formed a line of defense. Shields came up, bows were strung, and arrows nocked. The horsemen ran into a withering fire before they realized that their tactic was no longer wise. Of the three-hundred horsemen who had charged into the Zaran line, only half of them survived to come out the other side. The surviving riders turned towards the tail of Lizard Hill to regroup.

The Federation regiment reformed their column to defend against another attack, but the Lanoirians did not return. The Federation colonel eventually took stock of his regiment. He had less than half of his men remaining fit for battle, and the enemy still lingered between him and his objective, which was no longer a secret. He decided that his goal was now unattainable and ordered a return to the safety of the main column.

* * * *

At the north end of the valley alongside Lizard Hill, a full regiment of Federation soldiers filed out of the trees. They moved in an orderly manner across the valley and angled towards the neck of Lizard Hill. Their mission was to secretly outflank the Lanoirians. The colonel leading the small column kept his eyes on the ridge of Lizard Hill to see if there was anyone up there paying attention to his column, but the main attack had already started, and it looked like the Federation army was already carrying the day. With confidence that the Lanoirians were being beaten into submission by the main prong of the attack, the colonel ordered his men into the notch with intentions of climbing the rear of the hill. The first company was just through the notch when the attack started.

Arrows streamed out of the trees atop both the head and the body of the lizard. Every man in the first company fell to the ground. The colonel threw himself to the ground, thinking that the others had done the same. The move saved his life. The second round of arrows struck the second company, and all around the colonel, men fell to the ground, but it was not anything they did intentionally. The colonel stared at the bodies around him and saw that each man had an arrow in his body. With disbelief, the colonel gazed at the trees atop the head of Lizard Hill. He could see no one. He turned and looked back at his own column. He grimaced as he saw the confusion of his

company commanders. Some of the men were still coming towards the notch while others were veering off to go around the head of Lizard Hill. He wanted to jump up and shout at them, but he knew that was just asking for an arrow. Instead, he merely watched as the third company came under fire.

The air sizzled as one-hundred arrows sliced through it. The colonel watched in amazement as each of the arrows struck a body. The third company fell to the ground as a unit. He shook his head with disbelief and glared up at the head of Lizard Hill. He was staring at the ridge when the fourth volley of arrows cut through the air. He saw the elves step out from behind trees and fire, instantly stepping back into concealment. Knowing that the elves were busy nocking another arrow, the colonel rose and dashed towards the head of Lizard Hill. He dove for the concealment of a large boulder that had fallen down the hill sometime in the past just as another volley of arrows sliced through the air.

"Retreat!" the colonel shouted. "The elves will cut you down! Retreat!"

He might as well have saved his breath. The balance of his regiment had scattered, with the bulk of the men charging towards the slope of the head. The soldiers scrambled up the hill, breaking the elven routine of picking off entire companies at a time. Elven bowstrings still sang, but the shots were singular in nature, and the colonel could hear the shouts of his men as they engaged the elves with their swords. The colonel rose to his feet and drew his sword. He raced up the hill to get into the battle, but an arrow slammed into his chest before he crested the ridge.

* * * *

Ly-fung stood silently listening to the sounds of battle coming from the trench just below the crest of Lizard Hill. He could not see the fighting, but the sounds let him know that the true battle was about to begin. He glanced around at the huge ring of abatis enclosing him and the remnants of the Lanoirian army and bit his lip nervously. The large trees had been felled with their tops towards the enemy to make it difficult for the Federation soldiers to enter the protected area, but Ly-fung knew that the protection was temporary. There were less than fifteen-hundred Lanoirians inside the abatis ring, and the enemy numbered almost twenty-thousand. It would only be a matter of time before the Lanoirians were overrun, but Ly-fung was at peace with his decision to stand before the invaders. It was not that he was not scared; he was very frightened, but he had vowed to halt the advance of the Zarans, and that is what he intended to do. All of the men had been given the choice of staying with the wounded from the previous day's battle, and several hundred had accepted that offer.

Their task was to harass the rear of the Federation column and then safeguard their makeshift camp where the wounded were being kept.

For a brief moment, Ly-fung thought about that decision and wondered if he had made the right choice. His thoughts were interrupted by one of the men crawling out of the tunnel that extended to the trench. Unlike the other men who had come through the tunnel, this man called for help to roll a large boulder into the mouth of the tunnel. Ly-fung dropped his bow and ran forward to aid the man. Together they pushed the boulder into place, sealing off the tunnel. Ly-fung returned to his station and picked up his bow.

"It will begin now," he said softly to the men gathered near him. "Get ready."

It was an unnecessary command. Each Lanoirian already stood prepared for the coming onslaught. Within minutes, the distant cries of pain and death died out, an eerie stillness taking hold over the forest. Ly-fung nocked an arrow and stared through the branches of the abatis, searching for the first of the Zarans to crest the hill. He did not have to wait long.

The red-clad soldier came into view as he scrambled over the crest and stood staring in confusion at the abatis before him. Ly-fung let his arrow fly between the branches of the abatis. His aim was true, and the arrow plowed into the Zaran's chest. The Zaran screamed as his body pitched backward, but the sound of his scream was soon drowned out by a multitude of gasps and shouts as other Federation soldiers crested the hill and saw the bulwarks before them. Hundreds of Lanoirian arrows flew through the air, and the screams of the Zarans roared through the forest. Some of the Lanoirians shouted cheers as a whole line of Federation soldiers fell, but their enthusiasm was premature. Arrows began flying into the protected area, and Lanoirians began to fall.

Ly-fung saw the heads of Federation soldiers popping up along the crest and understood what was happening. "They are firing from below the crest!" he shouted. "Take cover!"

Ly-fung immediately followed his own advice and slid behind a tree. He nocked another arrow and moved into the open just long enough to select a target and let his arrow fly. He ducked back behind the tree wondering if his arrow had flown true. He had not stayed in the open long enough to verify his kill, and the air was so full of cries from men on both sides of the fight that listening for the cry of a particular victim was impossible. Ly-fung pushed the question from his mind as he nocked another arrow.

For the next hour, Ly-fung stepped into the deadly hail of arrows as quickly as he could nock his arrows and let them fly. He just as quickly ducked back behind the tree. There was no lack of targets as

the Federation soldiers moved in closer and began hacking at the branches of the abatis in an attempt to break through the barrier. A shiver of fear raced up the Lanoirian's spine. If the enemy succeeded in getting through the abatis, the end would come quickly for the Lanoirians. He reached for another arrow and found his quiver empty.

"Ly-fung," called a soft, feminine voice that carried through the chaotic sounds like the clear pealing of a bell.

The Lanoirian archer turned and saw Rut-ki. The Knight of Alcea was dressed completely in black, and she was pulling her own quiver from her shoulder. She tossed the quiver to Ly-fung and retreated to the safety of a large tree. Ly-fung caught the quiver and nodded thanks to Rut-ki. He set the quiver down and stripped off his empty one before pulling hers over his head. As he turned once again to thank the Knight of Alcea, he saw Rut-ki break from the safety of her tree and race across the open ground. When he saw her fall next to the slain body of a comrade, he grimaced in horror, thinking an enemy arrow had hit her, but his mourning was premature. Rut-ki quickly sliced through the strap of the fallen man's quiver before grabbing it and racing back to her tree. Ly-fung sighed with relief as he nocked an arrow to continue the fight.

It was not long after getting his new quiver that Ly-fung noticed arrows coming from another direction. One of them struck his tree slightly above his head, and the Lanoirian archer dropped to a squat. The Federation soldiers had managed to work their way around the edge of the barricade to the north, and Ly-fung had no doubt that the same would be true in the south. Although the abatis was still intact, the protected area was quickly growing smaller. He looked for a tree nearer the center that was not already occupied by a defender. He could not see one. When he turned towards Rut-ki, she waved for him to join her. Ly-fung did not hesitate. He picked up his empty quiver and raced across the open ground. Rut-ki made room for him behind her tree, but he could not imagine both of them seeking protection behind the same tree. Neither of them would be completely covered from enemy fire. When he arrived, he handed Rut-ki the empty quiver so that she would have something to hold her arrows.

"Thank you, Ly-fung," the Knight of Alcea said calmly as she took the arrows from her liberated quiver and filled the empty one.

"I thank you, Rut-ki," he replied, "both for the arrows and the safety of your tree, but I cannot stay here. There is not room for both of us."

"The trunk is yours," she replied with a smile as she pulled the full quiver over her head and positioned it. "I will take the upper limbs."

"You will be seen," Ly-fung said with alarm.

“Perhaps,” replied Rut-ki, “but can the Zarans reach such a height from beyond the abatis? We shall see.”

Without another word, the Knight of Alcea leaped upwards and snared a branch with her hands. She quickly pulled herself up and began climbing higher. Ly-fung followed her progress with awe and then realized from the enemy shouts that she had been seen. He quickly nocked an arrow and leaned around the tree to let it fly, but he did not immediately retreat to safety. With a defiant shout, he called attention to himself to distract the enemy from targeting the Knight of Alcea. It almost cost him his life. Three arrows slammed into the tree near his head, and Ly-fung dropped to the ground and crawled behind the tree.

As the day wore on, Ly-fung began to feel the strain of constantly firing arrows. His hands, arms, and shoulders ached from the simple task of pulling the bowstring back and letting it go. Sweat poured from his body from the exertion of leaping out to fire an arrow and leaping back to the protection of the tree. Twice he had had to scamper to the body of a fallen comrade to replenish his arrow supply, and he was out once again. He placed his back against the tree and slid down to sit upon the ground as his eyes scanned the area for another quiver of arrows. The simple act of resting for a moment made him realize how sore he was. He flexed his fingers wondering how many arrows he had sent into the enemy ranks, and his thoughts suddenly turned to the Knight of Alcea. Rut-ki had ascended the tree with a single quiver, and she had not returned for more arrows. He looked upward and saw Rut-ki descending the tree. She leaped from a low branch and landed next to him. He saw her empty quiver and blushed with embarrassment. He had not thought of resupplying her as she had done for him.

“I apologize,” he said softly. “I should have sent arrows up to you.”

“You could not,” Rut-ki said with a slight smile. “I was too high in the tree. I used my arrows sparingly, targeting only the officers. I think it has helped to keep the enemy confused and without direction.”

“What does it look like from up there?”

“It does not look good,” she replied candidly. “The Zarans are hacking away at the abatis from all four sides, and there are not enough of us left to do much about it.”

Ly-fung nodded silently. He had seen the mounting bodies of his comrades in the area around him, but he had not been sure if it was the same throughout the protected area. He sighed with despair. Colonel Wu-sang had told them that they would not survive the battle, so Ly-fung could hardly complain about his coming death, but he had

hoped that their stand would last more than just a few hours.

"What if we burned the abatis?" he asked. "Wouldn't that stop the Zarans from overrunning us?"

Rut-ki shook her head. "The fire would consume us before it hurt the enemy. Besides, I have only one jar of fire glue left, and it would be needed to start such green wood burning. All we would accomplish is giving the Federation a doorway to walk through the abatis when the flames died out. Do not despair, Ly-fung. The Battle of Lizard Hill is not yet over. Until the enemy finds a way through the abatis, they have not won."

"But you said that there were not enough of us left to stop them," frowned Ly-fung. "How can it not be over then?"

Rut-ki smiled. "The sun is fading quickly. While the Federation might be tempted to continue hacking well into the night, I think they can be spooked into retreating until morning."

"How?" asked the Lanoirian archer.

"While I have flown over the enemy before," answered Rut-ki, "most of the Zarans have never seen a unicorn. The canopy was too thick yesterday when I dropped fire glue among them, but that is not the case here on Lizard Hill. With most of their officers dead, I think they might break ranks and run back to the safety of their column, but I must wait for it to be closer to sunset. The combination of the coming darkness and the strangeness of the unicorn must coincide."

Ly-fung brightened and sat straight up. "Then I must replenish my arrows," he said enthusiastically. "I must do my part to make them feel unwelcome up here."

* * * *

"Ednor!" shouted General Kolling. "Get in here!"

The Baroukan colonel grimaced as the words reached his ears. He had been avoiding the general, but his luck had just run out. He turned and nodded in acknowledgement, but General Kolling had already turned to reenter the large command tent. Colonel Ednor turned back to watch the men of the 9th Corps straggle towards the camp. He sighed with resignation and marched towards the tent. He entered the tent and hesitantly approached the table set up in the middle of it.

"Why are you just standing out there watching our men return from the battlefield?" scowled the general. "You should be sending them back into battle until the Lanoirians are wiped out."

"The Lanoirians aren't going anywhere," the colonel said cautiously. "They will still be there in the morning, and our men need some rest."

"Rest?" shouted General Kolling. "They are not paid to rest. They are paid to fight. Turn them around and send them back to the front."

“They will not fight tonight,” retorted the colonel. “They might have stayed if it wasn’t for that unicorn flying over them, but they will not return to the battle now until the sun returns.”

“They don’t have a choice, Colonel,” snapped the general. “They are to follow orders just like everyone else. Gather the regiment commanders and tell them that I will hang the first one of them who refuses to lead his men back into battle.”

“That would leave you hanging me, General,” frowned Colonel Ednor. “I am the only regimental commander left alive. You don’t even have enough company commanders left to fill the ranks if you were to offer promotions. General, I do not mean to be argumentative, but your army is crippled. If you insist on having the Lanoirians attacked this night, I suggest you order the Aertans to do it. The 9th Corps is in tatters.”

The scowl faded from the general’s face as the colonel’s words registered. He had heard reports of heavy losses, but he had not imagined that his officers had been decimated.

“How many men have we lost?” he asked softly.

“I am not sure yet,” answered the colonel, “but it will not be a number that pleases you. The trench was a ruse to get us to attack rather than bypass the Lanoirians. Their true defense was a ring of abatis atop Lizard Hill, and they are prepared to defend it to the very last man.”

“To stop us from reaching Ongchi,” scowled the general.

“Yes,” the colonel replied with a nod, “and they have succeeded in delaying us. Even if we managed to break through their defenses tonight, we would not be marching towards Ongchi before morning. My suggestion is to rest the men tonight and reform the army in the morning. I would then suggest that we bypass Lizard Hill completely. There can’t be more than a couple of hundred Lanoirians left behind their fortifications, and victory over them would be worthless. We should have bypassed them this afternoon.”

“Now you are teaching me strategy?” snapped the general.

“That is not my intent,” the colonel replied quickly. “Things are always clearer looking back on them. I am not judging the decisions made, but rather trying to put things into perspective at this point. If you force me to send the men back to Lizard Hill tonight, they will desert, and I do not have the officers needed to stop them from doing that.”

General Kolling rose from his chair and bellowed, ”Desert? You and the rest of the cowards in Team Barouk sicken me. Get out of my sight!”

The colonel did not hesitate to take his leave. He saluted the general and immediately exited the tent. The guards posted outside

the tent gave sympathetic nods to the colonel as he exited, but Ednor did not notice. He returned to the edge of the camp and directed the returning soldiers to make camp for the night. For several hours, he watched the stragglers filing into the camp. There were far less of them than he had hoped for, and he noticed that the men made their camp as far from the large command tent as they could. When an hour had passed with no returning soldiers, the colonel sighed and made his way to one of the fire rings to talk with the returning men to find out what had happened. As he walked across the wide expanse of emptiness around the large command tent, he became aware of how great their losses were. The 9th Corps of the Empire of Barouk was but a shell of its former glory.

Chapter 43

Seeking Surrender

General Mobami, the Governor of Sordoa, sighed with frustration as he watched the Federation column march through the valley. He had been hoping to speak once again to General Barbone, but the Spinoan general had not even glanced in his direction, and the governor did not want to call too much attention to himself. The governor turned his horse and rode away from the column. A few minutes later, he rejoined his own men.

"Any luck?" asked Tedi.

"None," sighed the governor. "General Barbone did not even glance in my direction. I fear that I will not get a chance to talk to him before the attack."

"How far is it to the next valley?" asked Natia.

"A few minutes hard ride," answered the governor. "Why do you ask?"

"I think we can draw enough attention to ensure that General Barbone notices you," answered Natia.

"What are you planning?" Tedi asked, suspicion heavy in his voice.

"Nothing devious," answered the gypsy princess. "I think our unicorns would catch the attention of the Federation column. If we merely flew overhead and landed in the next valley, General Barbone would be sure to notice."

"That just might work," brightened the governor. "It will take the Federation column about half an hour to cover the distance, but I can be in place much quicker. Give me time to get situated and then fly over the Spinoan general. Land near me so that he cannot possibly miss seeing me."

"I am going with you," Tedi asserted as he stared at his wife.

"Afraid that I might run off with a Zaran officer?" quipped Natia.

"Afraid that you might poison the entire column," laughed Tedi. The gypsy prince grew serious and continued, "You might attract more attention than you want, Natia. My staff can even the odds a great deal if we find some overanxious Zarans coming towards us."

"I have always enjoyed your company," smiled Natia. "We will travel together."

General Mobami laughed at the light-hearted banter and rode away. Tedi and Natia leisurely checked their weapons and then

mounted their unicorns. At first they flew north, opposite the flow of the Federation column, and out of sight of the Zarans. When they felt enough time had passed, they rose higher in the sky and banked to the east. When they saw the Federation column marching along the Coastal Highway, they banked again and headed south directly over the column. Shouts rang out among the soldiers below, and the commotion rippled forward through the column. Soon soldiers ahead of the unicorns were turning around to gape at the flying creatures.

Natia had anticipated the Zarans shooting arrows up at the unicorns, and she had chosen an altitude that she thought was safe, but she need not have bothered. None of the Federation soldiers even strung their bows. They merely stared up in wonder and pointed.

"There is General Barbone," Tedi commented.

"I see him," replied Natia. "Let's slow down so he sees us bank into the valley."

Far below, General Barbone gazed up at the unicorns. He remembered seeing similar creatures the night that the black-cloaks died, and a shiver raced up his spine. He watched anxiously as the creatures flew overhead and then banked into the next valley. When he reached the valley, he gazed towards the west and saw the unicorns on the ground. He also saw the now familiar Governor of Sordoa. The bald-headed Sordoan sat on his horse staring at the column, just as he had earlier in the day. The invitation to talk was obvious, but the presence of the riders on the unicorns concerned the general. He moved out of the column and sat staring at the three figures at the far end of the valley. Before he could make up his mind about chancing a meeting with the governor, Colonel Pineta appeared at his side.

"What do you make of that?" asked the colonel.

"The bald one is General Mobami," answered General Barbone. "I believe he wishes to talk, but I do not know the other two."

"He is showing no flag of truce," remarked the colonel. "Besides, why would he want to talk to just you? Shouldn't he be talking to General Omirro?"

"He has already spoken to General Omirro," replied General Barbone. "Omirro threatened him while under a flag of truce."

After a moment of silence, the colonel said, "If you are thinking of going over there to talk to the governor, I will be going with you. I do not trust the Sordoans to treat you fairly."

The colonel's offer tipped the general's decision towards the meeting. He nodded in acceptance of the colonel's offer and started riding towards the western end of the valley. The colonel rode by his side. The two Zarans halted before the three Alceans, but said nothing in greeting.

“You asked for proof, General Barbone,” opened General Mobami as he untied a sack from his saddle and tossed it on the ground before the general’s horse. “I said that I would deliver it.”

Colonel Pineta looked at his general questioningly, and Barbone nodded towards the sack. The colonel dismounted and walked to the sack. He opened it and gasped.

“What is it?” General Barbone asked impatiently.

The colonel pulled out the head of General Ritka and held it up for General Barbone to see. The general merely nodded and looked up at Governor Mobami.

“What about Gattas and Montero?” asked General Barbone.

Governor Mobami untied two more sacks and tossed them towards the colonel. The colonel opened each in turn and held up the heads of the deceased generals. General Barbone sighed and nodded.

“You have proved the worth of your words,” he stated, “but that doesn’t change anything. General Omirro is the leader of Team Caldar. You must make your demands to him.”

“And I shall,” replied Governor Mobami, “but Omirro has a hard head. It will take more than the proof of my words to sway him. It will take a great deal of bloodshed as well. I am trying to save the lives of your men, Barbone. I wish you had as much concern for them as I do.”

“Do not lecture me on my responsibilities, Governor,” retorted the general. “I still do not believe that you would treat my men as well as you say. In fact, I see your ploy for what it is. You wish to split Team Caldar in two to make it easier to fight against. I will not betray my country to make it easy for you.”

“Ertak is hardly your country,” interjected Tedi. “And if you meant the Federation when you spoke, that is hardly your country, either. Spino is treated as a lesser member of the Federation. Even Queen Samir understands that.”

“What could you possibly know about Queen Samir and how she feels about anything?” snarled General Barbone. “Do not play childish games with me.”

“Actually,” smiled Tedi, “I have spent time in Queen Samir’s sitting room with Natia. We sold her that huge diamond that she enjoys showing off.”

“Plus the DeCardia figurines,” grinned Natia. “Don’t forget them.”

General Barbone frowned as he looked from Natia to Tedi and back to Natia again. “Just who are you people?”

“I am Tedi and this is Natia,” answered Tedi. “We are Knights of Alcea, but we are known as merchants in Zara.”

“Knights of Alcea?” echoed the colonel.

“The Knights of Alcea speak for King Arik,” explained Governor

Mobami. “They are authorized to act in his behalf.”

General Barbone raised an eyebrow. He had indeed heard about the queen’s large diamond, and he knew people who had purchased DeCardia figurines from the queen, but he could not imagine that the two people before him had actually been to Valdo.

“Describe the palace to me,” demanded the Spinoan general.

The question had been directed at Tedi, but Natia answered. She not only described the palace and the queen’s sitting room, but she also described the inside of the elven reeducation center. General Barbone shook his head in amazement.

“So you two are the spies who learned all the Federation secrets?” asked General Barbone.

“No,” answered Tedi. “Grand General Kyrga kept even Queen Samir in the dark regarding the invasion. We were part of the rebels who destroyed your fleet, freed the elves, and destroyed the shipyards in Giza.”

“We know more about the Federation plans than any Spinoan,” added Natia. “That is why we are trying to get you to surrender. Demonic forces are controlling Emperor Jaar. Those forces seek to create a million tears by sending the Federation armies to Alcea. Those tears are needed to restore Alutar, the Great Demon. It hardly matters to the demons who wins this war. What matters is that the death tally be great. That is why King Arik has demanded that we try to get all of the teams to surrender if possible. He not only wants to spare the Alceans from bloody deaths, but the Zarans as well.”

“She speaks the truth,” stated Governor Mobami. “I have forces enough to crush this entire column, but my king requests that I do not. I sense that General Omirro will not agree to surrender. That means that I must destroy the 10th Corps, but I do not wish to also destroy the 22nd Corps. That is why I have been meeting with you separately. Will you surrender?”

“How can you have enough men to crush this column?” the colonel asked skeptically. “You don’t have twenty-thousand fighting men in all of Sordoa.”

“Your spies, and yes I know you were one of them, Colonel Pineta, have done a poor job at evaluating our forces. Take a ride up the hill behind me and gaze upon fifteen-thousand Sordoan horsemen. When you get back, I will tell you about the thousands of dwarves and elves who are already filing into Trekum to man its walls. When your column gets caught between our forces, not a single Zaran will survive.”

The colonel looked to his general, and Barbone nodded his authorization. Colonel Pineta mounted his horse and rode past the three Alceans. He rode up the hill and gazed down upon the Sordoan

cavalry. He returned to the parley and simply nodded to the Spinoan general.

"I need time to dwell on this," stated General Barbone.

"You have precious little time, General," Governor Mobami responded. "I have revealed my armies, but I will not reveal my plans."

General Barbone nodded and turned his horse to return to the column. Colonel Pineta waited until they were well away from the Alceans before speaking.

"He didn't say how many thousands of elves and dwarves were in Trekum. Perhaps it is not enough to make a difference."

"Their numbers were enough to destroy Team Pontek," replied General Barbone, "and enough to cause Stemple to surrender Team Gortha. As much I don't like taking the word of the enemy, I believe we have been given a true picture of the situation. Now we must decide how to react to it."

* * * *

The sun was already high in the sky on day twelve of the Zaran invasion, and Team Miram showed no signs of breaking camp. King Arik paced the shoreline of a mountain lake while the others sat in the shade of a tree. Eventually, the king turned and walked to the others.

"What is the downside of just letting Team Miram remain in camp?" he asked.

"The downside is if Team Mya suddenly decides to attack Tagaret," answered Colonel David Jaynes. "We would be caught between two Federation teams."

"But Team Mya is also staying in camp since the death of General Fortella," posed the king. "In a day or two, the Army of the West and the Cordonian Army will catch up to Team Mya. Can't we just wait them both out?"

"It is possible that both Federation teams will remain in camp," frowned Colonel Mitar Vidson, "but are you willing to bet your kingdom on it? You are talking about forty-thousand Zarans within a day or two of Tagaret. If we do not play this well, we will lose the city."

"I agree," stated Queen Tanya. "We have to bring resolution to at least one of the Federation teams. They may be staying in their camps for now, but that is a far cry from surrendering. Do not underestimate the enemy."

King Arik looked to Alexander Tork questioningly. "How likely is General Whitman to surrender Team Mya?"

"Whitman is a fearful man," answered Alex, "but not entirely predictable. I would wager that he will stay in camp for several days to allow the other teams to reach Tagaret first and then move his

army towards the city with some excuse for being late."

"What if we convinced him that the other teams would never arrive at Tagaret?" asked King Arik.

"He might then be open to surrender," frowned Alex, "but there are others in Team Mya that you must take into consideration. The Baroukans will not like serving under an Aertan, especially one they consider a coward. If they manage to get their courage up, they could revolt against Whitman."

"What would happen then?" asked Queen Tanya.

Alex sighed and stared at the lake for a moment before answering. "It is hard to say. There could be a civil war between the two Federation armies of Team Mya, or one of them could exert control over the entire team. It is also possible that the team will split in two with one army advancing on Tagaret and the other remaining in camp. In short, I truly do not know the answer."

"Both Federation teams are too close to Tagaret to risk pulling the Targa Army out of the city," interjected David. "That leaves only the Rangers and the Red Swords to handle both teams, and we are woefully inadequate to handle just one. We need to talk one of the teams into surrendering. If we can do that, we pull the Targa Army out to reinforce us."

"We do not stand alone," countered the king. "We still have the Elderal elves, the Army of the West, and the Cordonian Army, although the latter two forces might not arrive in time to be of much help unless there is a siege of Tagaret."

"What of the men of Tor?" asked Alex.

"I have them posted near Miram to halt Bledsoe's retreat," answered the king, "although they would be easily overwhelmed if Bledsoe did turn his armies around."

"They are not many," stated Alex, "but they are good fighters. You should send word for them to join us."

King Arik nodded and then changed the subject. "I do not care much for this uncertainty. While both Federation teams remain in camp, either one of them could move immediately, and we would have to react. I prefer to make things happen rather than wait for them to happen. I am going down to parley with General Bledsoe. Maybe I can talk him into surrendering."

"Bledsoe will not surrender without being bloodied," warned Alex, "but I think the parley is a good idea anyway. Having the King of Alcea visit him will let him know that he is the main focus of our concern. That will make him worry about the forces we might send against him."

"I am going with you," Queen Tanya said to the king.

"As are Alex and I," declared Jenneva. "I also think Theos and

Balamor need to be in a position to observe the parley in case something goes wrong."

"I can take the mages to an observation post," offered David. "It looks down on the southern perimeter of the Federation encampment."

"Then that is where we shall parley," stated the king. "Get a fairy off to the men of Tor and tell them to join forces with us as soon as they can."

The four Heroes of the Mage mounted their unicorns and set off down the trail to the Coastal Highway. Jenneva fashioned a flag of truce on the way to the enemy encampment, and a while later they halted near the southern perimeter. The Federation sentries gawked at the royal couple dressed in their gold-trimmed white armor, but it was Jenneva who rode forward.

"King Arik of Alcea has requested a parley under a flag of truce with General Bledsoe and General Kozinski. Please inform the generals that the king awaits them."

A runner was sent to inform the generals, but word of the king's arrival spread through the encampment like wildfire. Jenneva retreated to the side of the road while Alex positioned himself at the other side of the road. The king and queen sat alone in the middle of the Coastal Highway. A thick crowd of soldiers gathered at the barricade to get a glimpse of the Alcean king, and Alex grew tense. His hand slowly moved to a pouch on his belt, and he fisted a couple of Lanoirian stars. The two Federation generals soon arrived, but Alex's eyes barely flicked towards them as he continued to scan the large crowd. His gut began to tighten, and Alex let out a slight sigh. It was enough to alert Jenneva to potential trouble. She strengthened the physical shields surrounding the royal couple.

"I am General Bledsoe," stated the leader of Team Miram, "and this is General Kozinski. Are you King Arik of Alcea?"

"I am King Arik," declared the king, "and this is Queen Tanya. We need to talk."

Suddenly, a knife flew out of the crowd towards King Arik. The knife impacted the invisible shield that Jenneva held and it fell to the ground. Even before the knife had completed it journey, Alex's hand whipped out towards the barricade. A Lanoirian star hurtled through the air and impacted in the forehead of a Federation soldier. The soldier fell to the ground and the Federation soldiers shouted and drew their swords.

"Stop!" shouted General Bledsoe, his voice loud and commanding.

For a moment, no one moved. The general turned and glared at the soldiers around the body of the assassin

"Take that body and hang it in front of my tent for all to see,"

commanded the Baroukan general. “We stand under a flag of truce, and I will not have that disrespected. If there are some among you who knew of this dastardly attempt on the king’s life and did not prevent it, report to Colonel Sawar for punishment. If you do not report to the colonel, and I discover your knowledge, your body will also hang before my tent. Now disperse.”

The gawkers quickly moved away from the barricade, but the sentries remained. General Bledsoe ordered them to leave as well and waited until everyone was gone before speaking.

“I apologize for such disgraceful behavior, King Arik. I am pleased that you were protected. Shall we retire to my command tent?”

“I prefer to speak here,” replied the king. “My message is short, and your camp needs no more excitement. I have come to request your surrender.”

General Bledsoe smiled slightly and shook his head. “You are young for a king, but certainly not so foolish as you are making yourself appear. One doesn’t request a surrender; one demands it. Unless, of course, one is in no position to demand a surrender, and that is exactly where you find yourself, isn’t it, King Arik?”

“The Federation’s invasion of Alcea is already a failure,” replied King Arik. “Of the twelve teams sent here from Zara, only four remain a threat. Yours is one of those four. It is my desire to end this foolishness with as little bloodshed as possible. You gain nothing by subjecting your men to warfare.”

“So you say,” retorted the Baroukan general, “but four teams is more than enough to crush all of Alcea, and I find it impossible to believe that you have conquered eight Federation teams. If you are so all-powerful, why are you here requesting my surrender? Shouldn’t your massive armies annihilate my team and concentrate on the other three?”

King Arik sighed with frustration. “I know why you have come to Alcea, General Bledsoe, but I doubt that you do. You think you are here to claim all of Alcea for the Federation, but your own people have betrayed you. The purpose of this war is to provide one-million tears to rejuvenate Alutar, the Great Demon. It matters little to Emperor Jaar’s master whether you win or lose as long as the bloodshed and suffering are great enough to produce those tears. My request for your surrender is meant to deny those tears to the Great Demon.”

“It would seem to me,” countered General Bledsoe, “that you could accomplish your worthy goal by surrendering to me. No blood will flow, and no tears need be created. You defeat the will of Alutar, and I fulfill the mission given to me by Emperor Jaar.”

“Emperor Jaar no longer rules the Empire of Barouk,” interjected

Alex. “Someone is staging a coup and has replaced him with a double. Your real concern at this point should be supporting the heir against the usurper.”

“I do not believe you,” scoffed the Baroukan general. “How could you possibly know these things? No ships have left the Sea of Tears in months.”

“We have portals of our own,” revealed Alex, “and we don’t have to travel to Camp Destiny to use them.”

General Bledsoe fidgeted as if he were suddenly anxious for the parley to end. Alex smiled.

“Don’t waste your time sending men back to Miram,” warned Alex. “Your portals are no longer there. You have no way to return to Zara except through us. That is why we can afford to be free with the knowledge we share. You have no one to tell it to.”

“Save the lives of your men, General Bledsoe,” urged King Arik. “I vow that they will be well-treated and generously-fed. Surrender to me.”

“No,” the Baroukan general replied. “I have a duty to the Federation and the wherewithal to carry it out. I cannot in good conscience ignore my responsibilities. This parley is over.”

The two generals turned and retreated.

“I pushed too hard,” frowned King Arik.

“No, Arik,” replied Alex. “General Bledsoe needs to be bloodied. In the meantime, you have given him much to dwell on.”

As the Heroes of the Mage turned to leave the barricade, a fairy dropped out of the sky and landed on Alex’s shoulder.

“General Whitman is dead,” reported Bitsy. “Team Mya is preparing to march on Tagaret.”

“What of the Army of the West?” asked Jenneva.

“They will not be in time to halt the advance,” answered Bitsy.

“So,” sighed the king, “we are forced to react anyway.”

“We are,” agreed Alex, “and we no longer have the luxury of trying to save the lives of the enemy soldiers. We either crush them quickly or we lose this war.”

Chapter 44

Seven Valleys

General Mobami, Tedi, and Natia rode south after their meeting with General Barbone, but they did not rush as the rest of the Sordoans did. An hour later, they caught up to one group of Sordoan horsemen, and they stopped to talk.

"Are your men ready?" asked General Mobami.

"They are ready," replied one of the horsemen.

"Good," replied the governor. "Your group will have the tail end of the 10th Corps. If it has already passed by and you are presented with the vanguard of the 22nd Corps, break off the attack. We are only seeking to cripple Omirro's men. Understood?"

"Understood," replied the horsemen.

"A fairy will give you the order to attack," the governor added as he started riding south again. "Good luck."

Tedi frowned in confusion as they continued southward. "There couldn't have been more than one-thousand men there, Governor. Is that enough to bloody the 10th Corps?"

Governor Mobami smiled. "The valley they will be attacking in is narrow, as are the next six valleys. I have divided up my men to attack in all seven valleys in quick succession. So quick, in fact, that Omirro's cavalry will be racing from one attack to the next."

"I don't understand," said Natia. "Why would his cavalry move? I thought he had spread them out to protect all of the valleys?"

"He has," replied the governor, "but with a twist. The fairies overheard new instructions given to the Federation riders. Each Federation company has a horn, and they are to blow it when an attack occurs so that the cavalry can rally to counterattack. I have worked out an attack plan that will keep them riding instead of defending the column. The attack will begin in the center valley. It will be a large and sustained attack. Before it is over, the valley to the south of it will be attacked, and so on, right up to the vanguard. Those forwardmost valleys have more of my men assigned to them than the others. After the vanguard is attacked, our attack will resume in the center valleys and work towards the rear. There will be no Federation cavalry at all to repel the later attacks, so I can use less men in those valleys."

"The first attack group will have heavy losses then," frowned Tedi.

“It will,” the governor agreed solemnly, “but there is no way around that short of General Omirro surrendering, and that is not going to happen.”

“Do you think he will surrender after the attacks?” asked Natia.

“Truthfully?” sighed the governor. “I think a reasonable general would, but General Omirro will not. If we had been successful at getting General Barbone to surrender, Omirro might give in after the attacks, but that hasn’t worked out, either. No, Omirro will need more than one bloody lesson before he understands that his cause is hopeless.”

“What if we could kill General Omirro?” asked Natia. “Would General Barbone surrender?”

“Right now?” asked the governor. “I don’t think so. He has not yet come to grips with surrendering just the 22nd Corps, never mind the entire Team Caldar, but if General Omirro should happen to die during the upcoming attacks, I think Barbone might just capitulate. This coming round of attacks will show him that we can tear his team apart before he reaches Trekum, and he already knows that we have been speaking the truth to him. It is not far from there to realize that his cause is lost. I would try to have my most forward group kill General Omirro during the attack, but the general will not be foolish enough to be caught in any valley when the horns start blaring. He will keep confined to a forested section of the Coastal Highway where he is safe.”

“He is in the vanguard then?” asked Tedi.

Governor Mobami nodded. “He is surrounded by one-hundred horsemen.”

“Won’t those riders rally to the attacks?” asked Tedi.

“And leave the general unprotected?” The governor shook his head. After a moment of thought, his eyes brightened. “They will not abandon their protection of the general, but if the attack is timed properly, they could be drawn away. If we time the forwardmost attack to coincide with the general’s passing through that valley, the company protecting him will have to respond. They will be the only portion of the column between the general and my horsemen.”

“So it is possible to kill Omirro?” asked Natia. “Why not do it?”

“It is possible,” the governor replied hesitantly, “but not by my men. The company escorting the general will not be drawn off very far. They will position themselves between the general and my men. They will most likely form a cordon across the Coastal Highway between the general and the fighting until reinforcements arrive. That will leave Omirro open for an assassination, but it will take a rather brave individual to hide in the forest before the column arrives.”

Natia frowned. “What is the catch? There is something that you

are leaving out. It does not take a particularly brave person to hide in the woods and send an arrow into the general."

"His escort will not entirely desert him," answered the governor. "That would be unacceptable. There will always be three of four riders to surround the general, and they will make him dismount and get in the center of them. We have already seen this on more than one occasion when they thought danger was near. No archer can shoot an arrow through a horse. It will take killing the general's protectors and then the general before trying to flee, and fleeing will not be easy. Their outrage will demand a thorough pursuit."

Natia chuckled anxiously. "I feel as if you just set me up for that. Did you have this planned all along?"

"No," the governor replied solemnly, "and I am not suggesting that you attempt it. In all probability, the attempt will fail, but you asked me for my opinion."

"Adjust your schedule to accommodate the assassination," stated Tedi. "We are already spilling more blood than I care for. If killing Omirro will hasten the end to this conflict, I will do it."

"Not without me," declared Natia. "Don't even think about leaving me behind."

Tedi smiled at his wife. "I would not think of going without you. We do this together or not at all." He turned to the governor and said, "Show us where we need to be to accomplish our goal."

* * * *

Colonel Verle was riding alongside General Omirro in the vanguard of Team Caldar when he heard the distant horn. The colonel and the general exchanged concerned looks.

"Go see what it is," ordered General Omirro.

Colonel Verle nodded and turned his horse. He raced back along the Coastal Highway, foot soldiers hugging one side of the road to let the horsemen pass. He had to slow down well before reaching the area of commotion as other horsemen were also responding to the call. The congestion on the road irritated the colonel, and he shouted for the infantry to get off the road. The foot soldiers tried to make way, but there were just too many soldiers on the road to clear it completely without halting the entire column, and they had been ordered to keep moving unless they were directly under attack.

The pace of the horsemen picked up a bit, and Colonel Verle finally heard the sounds of fighting. Having come all the way from the vanguard, Colonel Verle was among the last to reach the valley. When he broke into the open, he saw the Sordoan horsemen fleeing from the battle. Some of the 10th Corps cavalry were giving chase, but the colonel knew they would not go far. Their orders were to not stray out of sight of the column, and the chasers soon broke off contact and

returned towards the column.

Colonel Verle gazed around the valley. Hundreds of bodies littered the ground, both Sordoan and Zaran. Some horse bodies were scattered around the valley as were unmounted horses from both armies. He shouted for the horsemen to grab the free horses before they could wander off, but his order was never carried out. Before the men could comply, another horn blared in the distance. The response from the cavalrymen was immediate, and all of the riders surged towards the Coastal Highway.

The colonel spurred his horse, determined not to be at the rear of the pack, but others had the same idea. Worse for the colonel, the pack now included the cavalrymen who had been at the rear of the column. Well over one-thousand riders tried to race down the road alongside the infantry. By the time the colonel made it to the next valley, the battle was already over. Once again, he could only gaze upon the dead and wounded. A puzzled frown fell over the colonel's face as he pondered the timing of the two attacks. The two valleys were not that far apart, but they were far enough apart to preclude the same Sordoan warriors participating in both attacks. He nodded to himself, figuring that both attacks were meant to occur at the same time, but the Sordoans had not managed to coordinate it properly. That thought instantly dissipated at the sound of the third horn.

As Colonel Verle joined the pack for the race to the next valley, a nagging thought surfaced. The attacks appeared to be heading towards the vanguard. If he could rally enough riders to follow him, he might be able to skip the next attack and reach the vanguard in time to repel the Sordoans before they struck there. The colonel stood up in stirrups and shouted as loud as he could.

"Colonel Verle coming through! Clear the road! Rally to the vanguard!"

The cavalrymen before him heard the shouting, and they understood the words, but there was little they could do about it. Unless the infantry yielded the road, the cavalrymen were forced to follow one another. The colonel seethed with frustration.

"Halt the column!" he shouted. "Get off the road now!"

The soldiers were confused. They had been ordered not to halt the march unless they were attacked, yet they recognized the colonel's voice and sought to obey his command. The footmen near the colonel dutifully shuffled into the woods, and those behind them halted the column, but that did not ease the congestion. The soldiers before the colonel had not heard his command and they marched on until he repeated the call to halt. When he eventually reached the next valley, the colonel called for the cavalry to follow him and pressed forward towards the vanguard. The riders within the sound of his voice

dutifully obeyed and followed the colonel, while those who had arrived earliest chased after the retreating Sordoans.

Colonel Verle continued to shout at the foot soldiers to get off the road as he led the charge southward, and as he was the lead rider, it eased the flow for those behind him. Feeling good about anticipating the Sordoans' next move, the premature sound of the fourth horn shot through his body like an arrow. He rose up in his stirrups and gazed along the road. In the distance he could see the Sordoans tearing into the infantry ranks, and he cursed silently. He was too late to head off the attack.

While racing towards the enemy, Colonel Verle saw members of the vanguard cavalry leave General Omirro and rush to block access to the Coastal Highway. He nodded with satisfaction at the efficiency of their maneuvering, but he knew that those one-hundred cavalrymen would not engage the enemy. Their purpose was to deny the enemy access to the road. Only Colonel Verle and the riders behind him could chase the Sordoans away. He shouted a spirited charge and led the cavalry in a charge to repel the enemy.

The colonel was almost at the valley when distant movement caught his attention. He looked beyond the vanguard cavalry and saw four riders squared off. He knew that General Omirro stood in the center of the four riders. That was standard practice whenever the fight was brought to the general, but the movement he detected was not normal. He frowned as he watched two of the riders fall from their horses. His frown gave way to raw rage as he saw a man step out of the forest and swing his staff. The staff tore through horse and rider in a spray of blood, and Colonel Verle shuddered with revulsion.

"They are after the general!" the colonel shouted at the top of his lungs. "Rally to Omirro! Rally to Omirro!"

The fourth rider fell from his horse as a young woman stepped out of the forest. The man with the staff swung again, and Colonel Verle's teeth bit through his lip as he watched the staff connect with General Omirro's neck. The general's head flew through the air and the woman raced after it. The colonel dug his spurs into his horse in an attempt to gain revenge by killing the Sordoan couple, but chaos claimed the battlefield.

The Sordoan horsemen turned on the vanguard cavalry and engaged them, but not fully. It was as if the Sordoans hit them just hard enough to stiffen their resolve and then they turned and fled. At the same time, a fifth horn blared, but it was far in the distance, well past the center of the column. Some of the horsemen that the colonel was leading gave chase to the fleeing Sordoans while others tried to turn around and respond to the new attack. Colonel Verle ignored both and tried to race towards the attack on General Omirro, but the

vanguard cavalry had closed ranks to repel the Sordoans, and they refused to yield to him.

"General Omirro has been attacked you fools!" the colonel shouted. "Get out of my way!"

The vanguard cavalry immediately parted, but it was already too late. The colonel ordered men into the forest to search for the assassins, but they were never found. Colonel Verle halted the column and ordered a report of the casualties. When the report arrived, General Barbone arrived with it. The Spinoan general glanced at the headless corpse of General Omirro and shook his head with disgust.

"How did this happen?" he asked.

"Two assassins must have been waiting in the woods," answered the colonel. "I think the attacks were meant to draw off his protection so that they could strike."

"The attacks were meant for much more than a mere diversion," replied General Barbone. "The 10th Corps has suffered severe damage. There were seven attacks in all."

"I heard the horns," spat Colonel Verle. "No loss can be measured against the loss of General Omirro."

"Omirro was just a man," stated General Barbone, "the same as you and I. I know that you had a close relationship with him, but thousands of your men have died this day. Do not treat their deaths as inconsequential."

"Thousands?" frowned Colonel Verle. "I only saw hundreds of bodies."

"There were no horsemen to repel the Sordoans at the last three attacks," replied General Barbone. "Our famed infantry line of defense is rather ineffective against the Sordoans' reliance on horse bows. Our losses were great. Where is Omirro's head?"

"The woman took it," the colonel replied distractedly.

"Woman?" asked the general.

The colonel frowned and nodded, but he did not answer. The general waited patiently.

"I have seen her before," the colonel finally said. "Both of them in fact, but I cannot place where it was."

"We have met few Sordoans on this trip," stated the general. "Perhaps you saw them last fall when you were here? Maybe you shared a campsite with them?"

The colonel shook his head. "I remember each person we met clearly, and they were not among them."

"Well, it hardly matters at this stage," shrugged the general. "We need to get this column reorganized. I will be taking over as the leader of Team Caldar, but I am going to need your help holding the 10th Corps together. Your men are shaken up, Colonel, and you have lost a

fair number of officers. I would like your recommendations for promotions to fill the ranks."

"It was in Aerta!" exclaimed the colonel. "I saw them both in Aerta over a year ago. General Omirro and I shared a meal with them on the shores of the Sea of Tears. That is where I saw them. They said that they were merchants."

"Over a year ago?" echoed the general. "Are you sure?"

"I am certain," asserted the colonel. "They claimed to be Tyronians, but how can that be?"

General Barbone stared at the body of General Omirro and sighed with weariness. "Did the man use a staff? And was the woman's belt holding many knives?"

"You know them?" the colonel asked while nodding.

"They are Knights of Alcea," answered the general. "You have just verified what they have told me, but you have also told me more than they did. That you saw them in Aerta over a year ago tells me that they have known about this invasion a lot longer than we have known about it. You and I and two-hundred-forty-thousand other Federation soldiers are on a fool's mission, Colonel. We have been sent to Alcea to die."

"I do not understand," frowned the colonel.

"Nor do I completely," admitted the general, "but we will let the Alceans explain it to us. Put out a flag of truce. We need to talk to Governor Mobami."

"A truce?" balked the colonel. "For what purpose?"

"To negotiate the terms for our surrender," answered General Barbone.

"Surrender?" the colonel echoed, his voice rising with incredulity.

"If the terms are favorable," replied the general. "Team Pontek and Team Gortha no longer exist. I know that General Omirro thought the Sordoans were lying, but they have already proven that to me. The 10th Corps is in tatters, leaving only the 22nd Corps to stand against the enemy. In addition to the horsemen plaguing this column, Trekum is defended by thousands of elves and dwarves. We are incapable of winning, Colonel, but even if there were a chance of success, we have been sent here to die, and I will not sacrifice my men for Emperor Jaar or any of the dark masters that he bows to. Enough Ertakan and Spinoan blood has already stained these lands. Put out the flag of truce."

* * * *

The ten colonels of the 2nd Corps of the Empire of Barouk faced off against the ten colonels of the 24th Corps of Aerta. No one had drawn his sword yet, but the mood in the camp was tense. Behind the two groups of colonels the members of the two armies stood, warily

eyeing up each other. At the center of it all, Colonel Hershey stood toe-to-toe with Colonel Tamora.

"You need to get your men under control, Hershey," scowled the Baroukan colonel. "We are here to fight the Alceans not each other."

"That might have been true before," spat the Aertan colonel, "but the death of General Whitman changes everything. We mean to have the assassin hung, and we won't take no for an answer."

"Point him out," challenged Colonel Tamora. "We don't care much for assassins in the empire. And while you are at it, how about we hang General Fortella's assassin?"

"What does Fortella's death have to do with us?" scoffed Colonel Hershey.

"The assassin was seen entering Whitman's tent," retorted Colonel Tamora. "Even your own guards admit to that. How is it that he did not kill Whitman? Could it be because he worked for Whitman?"

"That is absurd," countered Colonel Hershey. "Why would General Whitman want Fortella dead?"

"To seize control of Team Mya," answered Colonel Tamora. "That is exactly what he did, isn't it?"

"This is getting us nowhere," interjected one of the other Baroukan colonels. "We have both had our generals assassinated, and it is ludicrous to think that anyone in this camp had anything to do with either death. Can't you both see that the enemy is trying to play us one against the other? Instead of marching on Tagaret, we are standing here quarreling while the enemy hurries their defense preparations. Tamora, we need to start marching the 2nd Corps towards Tagaret. Hershey, you should be leading the 24th Corps right behind us, but I won't assume to tell you what to do."

"He's right," Colonel Tamora said in a conciliatory tone. "Our mission is to capture Tagaret. That is something I think we can both agree on. Whatever ill feelings exist in this camp have to be put aside until we return home. Let Grand General Kyrga investigate things and take the appropriate action. Agreed?"

Colonel Hershey sighed and nodded. "Agreed, but I will lead the 24th Corps as I see fit. I do not acknowledge you as the leader of Team Mya."

"Fine," shrugged Colonel Tamora, "but I will be following General Fortella's attack plan. I will not deviate from that. If the 24th Corps wants a part of this fight, you will have to follow that plan as well."

Colonel Tamora did not wait for a response. He turned to his fellow colonels and signaled for them to get ready to march. Colonel Hershey sighed nervously and turned to his fellow colonels. They all looked at him questioningly.

"What are we going to do?" one of them asked softly.

“I am not sure why General Whitman chose not to march towards Tagaret,” Colonel Hershey replied, “but I can guess. I think he wanted the other teams to arrive there first. We have already lost a day here so I think we have fulfilled his desires. I think we should follow the 2nd Corps, but at our own pace. Have the men prepare to break camp after the 2nd Corps gets underway.”

Chapter 45

Battle of Duranga

The unicorn glided out of the setting sun and set down on the streets of Duranga, a deserted village on the Coastal Highway between Miram and Tagaret. The commander of the fighting forces of the Castle of Man dismounted, and a Red Sword pointed towards the nearby inn. Lieutenant Montbalm nodded silently and walked towards the inn. He opened the door and stepped into the common room. Standing just inside the door, he paused to let his eyes adjust to the dimly lit room. He smiled as he saw Alexander Tork, and he bowed to the king and queen.

"Welcome," greeted King Arik. "Have the men of Tor arrived?"

"We are camped one league north of the Federation encampment," Lieutenant Montbalm replied as he crossed the room and glanced at the map spread out on the table. "I camped to the north so that the Federation didn't see one-thousand unicorns flying over their camp."

"A wise precaution," the king responded with a slight smile, "but I intend for them to see your men. Send your fairy back with instructions for your men to form a column in the air. The column is to circle over the enemy encampment high enough to avoid arrows and then return to their camp. If they can circle more than once to give the appearance of more troops, do so, but do not let the enemy know that we are trying to trick them."

Lieutenant Montbalm frowned. "You want my men to intentionally alert the enemy to our presence?"

"I do." The king nodded. "I want them to know that any escape to the north will be met by the men of Tor and their flying unicorns. Send the fairy and then I will explain our plan."

The lieutenant nodded and stirred Tiny to life. He gave the fairy instructions and sent him on his way before returning his attention to the map.

"Are we to attack then?" he asked.

"Tonight," replied King Arik. "The men of Tor will be responsible for blocking a northward evacuation. I do not want your men to charge into battle. In fact, I want them to primarily use their bows. Do not engage in close combat because the enemy would easily overrun you. If you have to give ground, do so, but make them pay dearly for each pace they take northward. Instruct the unicorns to maintain

distance from the enemy, and they will position as necessary. In addition, Theos will be joining your group." The king paused to wave the Tyronian mage forward. "If the enemy starts to surge towards you, Theos will make them think twice about their tactics. Work closely with him."

"Are we not trying to gain their surrender then?" asked the heir from the Castle of Man.

"I truly prefer their surrender," replied the king, "but we are out of time. Team Mya is marching on Tagaret."

"The men of Tor will hold the line," vowed Lieutenant Montbalm. "You can depend on us."

"I know," King Arik smiled before turning to Alex. "Alex, you and Jenneva will have the western flank. You will have the Alcean Rangers with you. I will not presume to tell you how to fight, but I do not want the Federation slipping away from us."

Alex nodded silently, and Jenneva gave her husband a suspicious glance. It was unlike Alex to remain quiet during a strategy briefing, and he had not said a word yet.

"Queen Tanya and I will be driving the main thrust up from the south," the king continued. "David and the Red Swords will be with us."

"That leaves the east open," stated Mitar Vidson.

"It does," agreed the king, "but there is nothing to the east but the sea."

"The enemy could turn north or south at the coast," frowned David Jaynes, "and we have no reserve forces to stop them. Your plan is committing every man to battle."

"I will stop those who reach the coast from turning north or south," offered Balamor. "Illusions can be powerful deterrents even at night."

"Excellent," replied the king.

"Do you really expect to defeat the enemy with this raid?" asked Theos. "The enemy outnumbers us four-to-one. You cannot expect to defeat them all and leave this place with any of your armies intact. Who will you send against Team Mya?"

"I do not seek to kill twenty-thousand men this night," answered King Arik, "but I will acknowledge that this battle will be costly for our side as well as theirs. We either defeat Team Miram tonight, or we fall back to Tagaret and face forty-thousand men at our walls."

"The Alceans who will be fighting tonight," added Queen Tanya, "are among the finest fighters in the world. They will give a good accounting of themselves."

"Here here!" exclaimed David Jaynes. "The Zarans will rue the day they stepped through those portals."

Jenneva glanced at Alex again and wondered why he was not speaking up. She frowned and shook her head before returning her gaze to the king.

"Are we looking for confusion among the enemy?" she asked. "Is that why you are staging this fight at night?"

"Confusion?" echoed the king. "I am looking for total chaos, and I expect my mages to help create it. Before the attack begins, I want you and Tanya to create fear and chaos in the enemy ranks. Once you have sufficiently stirred the hornets' nest, we will push into the camp from the south."

"What is your objective?" asked Alex.

"To put the Sword of Heavens to the throat of General Bledsoe and demand his surrender," King Arik answered without hesitation.

Alex smiled and nodded in appreciation of the plan. "That is a worthy goal. Just make sure that a good deal of Zaran blood has already stained the ground before you get to his tent, otherwise he will not yield."

The king nodded in understanding and continued the briefing until everyone knew their part in the battle. As the sun began to set over Duranga, the meeting broke up and everyone headed for their groups. As they left the inn, Jenneva pulled Alex aside.

"You were unusually quiet in there today. Is something bothering you?"

"There was no need for me to speak," Alex replied.

Jenneva chuckled. "That has never stopped you before. Why so quiet?"

Alex sighed and gazed into his wife's eyes. "You still think of Arik as the boy we found in Largo so many years ago, but that memory no longer reflects who he has become. Arik is one of the finest commanders I have ever known, and it does no one any good for me to constantly infringe on his rightful place. His plan is sound and is much like what I would have planned had it been up to me. Give him space to become who he will become, Jenneva. He is the Warrior King."

Jenneva's brow creased sharply. "I agree with your words, husband, but I suspect there is something deeper bothering you. Have you had any dreams lately? Have you seen your own death this night?"

"My life will not be led by dreams," scoffed Alex. "There is nothing deeper in my meaning than the words I just uttered. Let's go and get ready for the attack."

* * * *

Sergeant Dilney frowned as he watched the other squad of soldiers from the 17th Corps of Spino approaching the western

perimeter of the camp. He called his own squad to attention and prepared to hand off the guard detail to the new arrivals before returning his gaze to the approaching soldiers. The replacement squad moved sluggishly, and their sergeant did not seem to notice or care. He made eye contact with his replacement before speaking softly.

"It has been quiet so far," Sergeant Dilney reported, "but I would remind your men that we are in hostile territory. They need to stay alert."

"My men can handle perimeter duty," scowled the other squad leader. "They need no reminding."

Sergeant Dilney shrugged and called for his men to form up. His squad members quickly formed a column, and Sergeant Dilney marched them away from the western perimeter. He led them to the squad's area of the camp and dismissed them. As his men settled in for the evening meal, the sergeant turned and walked away. He wandered through the encampment until he saw Colonel Shellard, assistant to General Kozinski. He caught the colonel's eye and waved for his attention. The colonel nodded in acknowledgement and the two men met halfway.

"I have a concern about the men, Colonel," Sergeant Dilney said cautiously, "but I do not wish to bring the matter to the attention of General Kozinski. May I speak to you about it?"

The colonel hesitated, but he eventually nodded silently.

"Many of the men are taking our situation too casually," declared the sergeant, "particularly in regards to sentry duty. My squad was just replaced on the western perimeter by a squad that wouldn't see a dragon approaching until it ate them. The sad part is that such a squad is not an exception in the 17th Corps right now. The men have grown complacent, Colonel. They act as if we are back in Valdo protecting a supply depot, as if they can't wait until their duty is up so they can visit the nearest tavern. They need to be reminded that we are in enemy territory."

Before the colonel could reply, the ground trembled. The eyes of both men widened in alarm as the trembling grew more intense. Small debris began falling from the trees and tents began to collapse. The sergeant and the colonel instinctively reached out for each other to steady themselves as men walking through the camp stumbled and fell. As the trembling intensified, a roaring wind began to blow through the camp. The wind whipped up walls of dirt which blasted everything in its path. Tents were ripped from the ground and sent flying away. Sparks from the campfires shot through the air, burning holes in the tents and searing the flesh of anyone unfortunate enough to be caught downwind.

"This is magic," hissed Colonel Shellard. "I bet an attack will soon

follow. Run to the western perimeter and replace that incompetent sergeant. Take over his squad and prepare them to repel attackers. I will need a runner, so send their sergeant to me. I will be in General Kozinski's tent."

Sergeant Dilney broke away from the colonel and raced towards the western perimeter. Waves of dirt blackened the already darkening dusk, but the sergeant had a good sense of direction. He ran blindly through the camp, quickly picking himself up each time the moving ground tripped him. He felt numerous stings from flying sparks, but he ignored them. All around him, the soldiers were panicking. The dirt-filled air was saturated with shouts of alarm and cries of pain. He ignored them as well.

As Sergeant Dilney approached the western perimeter, the wind seemed to die down, and the trembling of the ground lessened. He halted his mad rush by grabbing onto a tree and stared in confusion at the sight before him. At first all he saw were the sentries of the western perimeter stretched out on the ground, but then arrows streaked out of the trees and other soldiers fell. With no squad for him to command, Sergeant Dilney quickly moved behind the tree and peered around it. Cries of pain ripped through the air as hundreds of arrows flew into the camp.

Several captains shouted orders in an attempt to organize a defense of the camp. They ordered their companies to form shield walls and prepare to assault the forest with waves of arrows, but the enemy gave them no time to organize. Another volley of arrows from the forest was followed by a mounted charge. Sergeant Dilney watched with rapt fascination as black-clad warriors surged out of the trees and attacked the Spinoan soldiers. The sergeant's eyes were quickly drawn to one imposing warrior with long golden hair tied in a tail. The Alcean moved like a specter through the Spinoan ranks, his long two-handed sword drawing blood with each swing and back swing. Sergeant Dilney shuddered as the Alceans advanced, cutting down everything in their path. He turned and ran towards the center of the camp.

When Sergeant Dilney reached the center of the camp, he found both command tents collapsed in tatters. Pandemonium reigned as officers shouted orders, and runners ran off to carry messages to distant companies. The sergeant saw Colonel Shellard and ran to him, but he halted wordlessly upon arrival. The colonel was dispatching troops to reinforce the camp's defenders, and the sergeant thought someone else had already delivered the bad news. He realized his error when the southern perimeter was mentioned as the location of the attack.

"Colonel," the sergeant said loudly with an urgent tone. "The

southern perimeter is not the only attack. The western perimeter is being overrun by Alceans."

The colonel turned with alarm on his face. "How many attackers?"

"Hundreds," answered the sergeant, "maybe thousands. I did not stay to take count of them, but they are cutting their way into the camp without much opposition. Hundreds of our men were struck down in the initial volley, and the Alceans charged before a defensive shield could be formed. The barrier didn't even slow them down."

The colonel did not answer immediately. When he eventually spoke, Sergeant Dilney thought his voice was amazingly calm considering the situation.

"Sergeant," ordered Colonel Shellard, "I want you to personally check the northern and eastern perimeters. Carry word back to me if we are under attack from those quarters as well. If we are not, inform the perimeter guards to expect an attack at any moment."

"Just the northern perimeter and hurry," countermanded General Kozinski as he joined the conversation. "There is nothing but sea to the east of us."

"There is enough forest to conceal a rather large army," countered the colonel.

"The Alceans don't have enough men to cover all four sides," retorted the general. "I would be surprised to even find any enemy to our north, but I want to be sure. Besides, General Bledsoe's men are camped in the southern and eastern sectors of the camp. We need to concern ourselves with the west and the north. Hurry along, Sergeant."

The sergeant saluted and turned to race northward, but he heard the general's next words before he was out of range.

"Recall our troops, Colonel," said the general. "I want our men dispatched to reinforce the western perimeter. General Bledsoe will have to use just the 7th Corps to defend the south."

Sergeant Dilney ran hard, thankful that the trembling ground and roaring wind had ceased. Without having to suffer the effects of the magical attack, the sergeant was able to weave his way through the camp without delay. As he ran northward, he could hear the sounds of fighting off to his left. He frowned heavily because the fighting sounded much too close. The perimeter was a fair distance away, and he doubted that the black-clad warriors could have penetrated so deeply into the camp in such a short time. He wondered if there was another attack force that the general was not aware of.

As the sergeant approached the northern perimeter, he saw thousands of Federation soldiers streaming from the southwest. Several companies of soldiers stood blocking the northern perimeter

facing south. Shouted voices started to reach the sergeant's ears, and he frowned in confusion.

"They are not human," shouted one of the soldiers. "You cannot fight against something that will not die."

"Get back to your assigned positions, or you will die right here," retorted a colonel. "I will not say it again. My next words will be for my men to fire arrows into the lot of you. Move!"

The complaining soldiers turned and moved off, but their pace was hesitant. Sergeant Dilney made for the perimeter barricade, and the soldiers before him drew their swords and converged on him. The colonel who had just rebuked the others turned towards Dilney with contempt clearly on his face.

"I cannot stomach cowards," the colonel scowled. "Hang him as an example to the others."

Sergeant Dilney shouted in horror as he realized that the colonel was talking about him. "Wait! I was sent by General Kozinski to check the northern perimeter. Have you all gone mad?"

"I know you," scowled the colonel. "Your squad has sentry duty on the western perimeter."

"It did until just recently," admitted Sergeant Dilney, "but their time is over. I went to Colonel Shellard to report the attack in the west and General Kozinski sent me up here to see if you were also under attack. What is going on?"

The colonel hesitated and then waved away the sword-bearing guards. "Your brethren at the western perimeter are fleeing the battle like the cowards they are. They think they can flee into the woods to the north. They are afraid of fighting spirits."

"We are not being attacked by spirits," replied the sergeant. "I saw the black-clad men. They are warriors of supreme quality, but they are men just like you and me. I take it that the northern perimeter is free of the enemy?"

"No," answered the colonel. "I have already dispatched a runner to General Kozinski. You must have passed him on the way here."

Sergeant Dilney turned and gazed across the barricade. It was already too dark to see very far, but he thought he could make out several bodies stretched out on the road.

"What is out there?" he asked.

"I do not know," answered the colonel. "Some of the cowards got over the barricade before I spread my men out. I gave the order to cut them down, but it was unnecessary. The Alceans did it for us."

"General Kozinski needs to know what we are facing," stated the sergeant.

The colonel nodded. "I have been waiting for the order to check it out." The colonel waved for a captain to come to him. "I want your

company to find out what the enemy has out there. Do not engage the Alceans. Just determine their number and return. Be careful. With everything else going on today they are likely to attack without warning."

The captain saluted and ran off to gather his men. Moments later one-hundred mounted Federation soldiers stood ready to journey out of the encampment. Sergeant Dilney listened as the captain addressed his men.

"I want one squad to move quietly through the trees east of the road," instructed the captain. "Another squad will do the same on the west side of the road. The rest of us will give you a head start and then come up the road at a gallop. As soon as we make contact, we will turn and retreat. We do not plan to dally long so pay attention. Keep your eyes sharp to see who attacks us. I want estimates of their strength. Once you have that estimate, quietly retreat through the forest. Questions?"

There were no questions and men moved the barricade to allow the cavalry to pass through. Two squads exited the camp and immediately moved off the road and into the trees. The other three squads sat in the middle of the road and waited. When the captain thought enough time had passed, he simply brought his arm up and pointed northward. Three squads of Federation cavalry raced northward along the Coastal Highway. Sergeant Dilney stood next to the colonel and watched them disappear into the darkness. Moments later, the sounds of loud explosions ripped through the air. Cries, shouts, and screams of anguish split the night. Suddenly, the road north of the camp glowed fiery red and flames shot up into the air. Just as suddenly, the area returned to darkness, and the battlefield fell silent. The sentries manning the barricade glanced nervously at one another, wondering if they should keep the barricade open or close it. They looked to the colonel for an answer, but the colonel stood still, staring northward. For several tense moments, no one moved or spoke. Then, through the eerie silence, a single horse's hooves sounded on the road. Soldiers readied their bows and nocked arrows, waiting for the order to fire, but no order was given.

As the horse came closer, the red uniform of a Federation soldier could be seen. The men manning the barricade uttered muffled gasps before Sergeant Dilney could understand what was coming into the camp. A moment later, he understood. A lone soldier rode his horse through the barricade at a walk. His uniform was shredded and bloody, and he had three arrows sticking out of his chest. One side of the horse bled profusely, thousands of small wooden splinters sticking out of its flesh. The soldier's mouth moved, but the voice was so soft that the sergeant could not hear the words. He ran to get closer, but

he was too late. Both horse and rider fell to the ground, dead.

"What did he say?" the sergeant asked the sentries.

"Just four words," answered one sentry. "Archers, unicorns, mages, thousands."

"Close the barricade," the colonel ordered loudly before turning to the sergeant and whispering, "Carry his words to General Kozinski, and be quick about it. If such a force decides to attack, we will have trouble keeping the men from turning tail."

The sergeant nodded silently and started running southward. Keeping in mind the encroaching Alcean black-clad warriors to the west, he curved eastward as he raced towards the center of the encampment. He was halfway between the northern perimeter and the center of the camp when he came across one of his own men. The man was running from the eastern perimeter, and Sergeant Dilney altered course to head the man off. He halted in front of the running soldier and demanded that he stop.

"What are you doing in the east?" scowled the sergeant. "Why aren't you fighting the Alceans in the west?"

"No one is fighting the Alceans in the west," answered the soldier. "They all fled. I had no choice but to follow. I thought maybe we were ordered to a larger attack in the east, but that was not the case. The first to flee must have overpowered the eastern perimeter guards and tried to escape, but only death awaits us that way."

"What are you talking about?" the sergeant asked angrily.

"Dragons," the man answered with a tremor in his voice. "Scores of them have gathered by the sea. I would rather die to an arrow than in the jaws of those monsters."

"You will die by hanging if you don't gather the rest of our squad and fight the Alceans coming through our sector," snapped the sergeant. "I have to report to General Kozinski, but I will be heading to the west as soon as I am done. If you are not there before me, you had better already be dead."

Sergeant Dilney did not wait for a response. He turned and continued his run towards the center of the camp. When he arrived, he found the general in the midst of total chaos. He quickly explained what had transpired in the north, adding in the fact that men from the west were fleeing from the attackers. He then mentioned what his own man had told him of the east. The general shook his head and sighed heavily.

"Colonel," the general said to Colonel Shellard who had been standing close enough to hear the report, "I want our command center moved northwest. We need to be closer to the action. Send out runners to tell every regiment commander that they are to gain control over their men and report to me at the new command center.

We are gathering in force to present a proper defense."

"We are abandoning the barricades?" the colonel asked with a frown.

"Blast the barricades, Colonel. Did you not hear this man's report? We are losing control over our army. Plant a flag one-thousand paces northwest of here and call it the command center. I want the entire 17th Corps to gather there and present a solid circle of shields to the enemy. The Alceans do not have enough men to beat us unless they can scare our men senseless. I will not allow that to happen."

Chapter 46

Alcean Retreat

Colonel Sawar of the 7th Corps of the Empire of Barouk had just finished checking on the southern perimeter of Team Miram's camp when the ground began to tremble. He was already halfway back to the command tent and torn as to which way to go. He did not think the earthquake was natural. In fact, he felt it was the opening salvo of a battle with the Alceans. Figuring that General Bledsoe must have felt the trembling as well, and understood its significance, he turned around and began running back towards the southern perimeter to organize the defense. That was when the fierce winds struck out of the south. The first gust of wind lifted the colonel off his feet and slammed him into a tree. Pinned to the tree by the ferocious windstorm, the colonel raised his arms and covered his face. Pebbles and twigs blasted the colonel's body, but the wind carried something much more ominous, the sounds of battle.

After a while, the winds abated enough for Colonel Sawar to push off the tree. He struggled against the wind as fast as he could towards the southern perimeter with his eyes barely open. He had covered more than half the distance to the barricade when the wind suddenly died. The colonel opened his eyes fully and saw that the enemy was already past the barricade. He saw the king and queen of Alcea in shining white and gold battle attire riding at the head of the Alcean army. He gawked at the horns protruding from the unicorns' heads and watched with amazement as both the king and queen swung their long, two-handed swords with seeming ease. Federation soldiers on both sides of the royal couple fell with mortal wounds, but the most gruesome deaths were the two red-clad soldiers who were unfortunate enough to be in the way of the charging unicorns. The unicorns lowered their heads in unison and gored the soldiers with their long horns, flipping the gutted bodies aside without breaking stride.

The colonel anxiously glanced right and left of the royal couple and saw Alceans as far as he could see in each direction. The Federation soldiers along the southern perimeter were retreating before the enemy charge, but not in a panic. The Federation soldiers retreated in as orderly fashion as possible given the sudden onslaught. Here and there a shield wall was established, but the Alceans quickly outflanked the uncoordinated efforts. The colonel knew that it would take some organization to prevent a rout. He turned around and ran

towards the center of the camp.

As he ran towards the center of the camp, the colonel came upon troops rushing towards the fighting. He waved for the men to halt and then called for the company commanders to gather around him.

“We need a defensive shield line right here,” stated Colonel Sawar. “I want it to eventually spread the entire width of the camp with wings to protect our flanks, but we will have to start it smaller until more men arrive. For now, form it two rows deep and as long as we can. We will lengthen it later.”

The company commanders nodded in understanding and began deploying their men. Colonel Sawar, knowing that his orders would be carried out, broke into a run for the large command tent. When he arrived, he saw that the tent had been destroyed. He glanced around and found General Bledsoe issuing orders to several colonels. He ran to the general to report.

“King Arik and thousands of his men have penetrated the camp via the southern barricade,” the colonel reported. “Our men are not able to repulse them, but I have started a shield line a fair distance behind our front lines. We need more men to reinforce it.”

“I have already given the orders,” the general replied calmly, “but I am keeping several regiments in reserve. I doubt that King Arik is the only Alcean leading an attack this night. The Alceans do not have the numbers for a single frontal attack. It would be suicide. He is probably trying to draw our men southward so he can attack from another angle.”

“You are correct, as usual,” stated General Kozinski as he walked towards General Bledsoe. “I just had a report of an attack on the western perimeter. I am going to need to pull the 17th Corps regiments away from the southern battlefront.”

“How serious is the western fight?” asked General Bledsoe. “Is it a full attack or a feint?”

“I believe it to be a serious attack,” answered General Kozinski. “I have reports of several thousand men, and they are not skirmishing. They are charging into the camp. Our forces have not been able to form a line yet.”

General Bledsoe frowned deeply. “I did not think the Alceans had enough men for a fight this large. Several thousand men in each of two prongs already surpasses the estimates our black-cloaks gave us.”

“The black-cloaks did not know about the men on unicorns,” General Kozinski pointed out. “Evidently the Alceans have gotten reinforcements from somewhere. We will just have to deal with what they have.”

“Agreed,” General Bledsoe responded. “Send someone to check the northern perimeter. I will send someone to the east. I want to

know exactly what we are facing."

"I have already sent a man north," replied General Kozinski. "I will let you know what he reports."

General Bledsoe nodded silently, and General Kozinski left to return to his own men. The Baroukan general sighed thoughtfully and then addressed Colonel Sawar.

"You can have seven regiments, Colonel. Build your shield wall, but keep me informed of the enemy's progress. Something about this attack doesn't sit well with me."

"How do you mean, General?" asked the colonel.

"It strikes me as a desperate ploy," answered General Bledsoe. "The Alceans could ignore this team and fall back to their city walls, but they are instead attacking our camp at night. That tells me that at least one other team is still in play."

"How does that knowledge help us?" asked Colonel Sawar.

"It tells me that this attack is not meant to merely harass us," answered the general. "They mean to finish us off tonight, or die in the attempt. I can't imagine how they can possibly hope to succeed, but I am sure that is their goal."

"You always taught me not to underestimate the enemy," frowned Colonel Sawar. "If the Alceans truly think they can win, they must have resources that are unknown to us."

"Indeed," replied the general. "Those men on the flying unicorns were never reported before. That is why I am holding three regiments in reserve. Go build your shield wall, Colonel, and try to capture the Alcean king. If we can capture him, we will not only win this battle, but also this war. If you cannot capture him, kill him."

Hovering in the darkness over the two Federation officers, a tiny pair of ears heard the entire conversation. As the colonel left to form his shield wall, Prince Midge shot up into the night sky and headed south. The fairy prince darted over the Federation camp until he saw the Bringer and the Red Swords. He dropped out of the sky and landed on King Arik's shoulder just as the Bringer was delivering a deadly stroke to a Federation captain. The severe movement of the Bringer's shoulder almost sent the fairy prince tumbling from his perch, but Prince Midge grabbed the king's ear and hung on, his tiny feet swinging in the air.

"There are gentler ways of getting my attention," King Arik quipped. "What have you learned?"

"They know that Alex is attacking from the west," reported Prince Midge, "but the worst news is more personal. General Bledsoe is keeping three-thousand men in reserve, and they are gathered all around him. He has also ordered your capture or death to force an end to the war. It will be very hard for you to get close to him. Also, there

is a shield wall ahead of you. Not more than five-hundred paces from here."

King Arik slowed to let the Red Swords take the lead while he pondered this new information. Queen Tanya slowed alongside him.

"General Bledsoe is more clever than I gave him credit for," stated the king. "He must suspect that I am coming for him. If we manage to break through the shield wall, we will be stuck between two large portions of Bledsoe's army. That is not a position I want to be in. We need to draw those three reserve regiments away from the general or I will not get close to him. Get to Alex and tell him what you have told me. Ask him to draw off Bledsoe's reserve. Inform him that he can use the men from Tor if needed. After you do that, return to spying on the general and inform me when the reserves leave his side."

"For the Bringer!" Prince Midge said loudly while saluting.

The fairy prince shot upward and the king turned to the queen. "Wake Bantam and send her to find David," Arik said. "I want the Red Swords to fall back."

"Wake me?" complained Bantam. "Even a fairy would find it impossible to sleep through this battle. I am on my way."

The blue fairy shot out of Tanya's pocket and sped into the night sky. Moments later a horn blew and the advance of the Red Swords immediately halted. The Alceans promptly turned their horses and galloped away. Shouts of victory roared through the Federation lines, but Colonel Sawar frowned and shook his head in confusion. He saw no victory in the Alcean retreat. In fact, it was Federation bodies littering the ground, not Alcean. He wondered why the enemy had given up on a successful charge and suddenly left the battlefield.

"Do we give pursuit?" asked one of the company commanders.

"No," the colonel replied loudly so that everyone heard him. "We hold this line until instructed otherwise."

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Prince Midge soared high in the sky and descended rapidly at the western perimeter expecting to find the Alcean Rangers, but he found it desolate. Hundreds of Federation bodies littered the ground, and he turned eastward to follow the trail of destruction. The sounds of battle alerted the fairy prince long before his eyes could detect the Alcean Rangers. The black-clad men on their black horses seemed to merge with the darkness. The fairy prince darted through the Alcean warriors until he saw the white unicorn that Jenneva rode into battle. As he expected, Alexander Tork was close by. He swept down and landed on Alex's shoulder. He quickly repeated the Bringer's message.

Alex whistled sharply, a signal to the Alcean Rangers. Kaz immediately turned around and galloped westward. The rest of the Alcean Rangers broke off contact with the enemy and followed.

“Your message has been delivered, Prince Midge,” stated Alex. “Tell Arik that we will draw off the reserves.”

“He already knows that,” replied the fairy prince. “Unless you have a real message for the Bringer, I will not be returning to him just yet. I will be going to spy on General Bledsoe.”

“Then spy well, my little friend.”

Prince Midge bowed to Alex and then shot into the air.

“What a ham,” commented Bitsy as she shot out of Alex’s pocket. “Spying is no great feat for a fairy.”

“It is a talent your people have mastered,” smiled Alex. “I need you to take a message to the men of Tor. On your way, I want you to observe the camp between us and the northern perimeter. Report on your observations when you return.”

Alex gave the fairy a rather detailed message for Lieutenant Montbalm and then sent her on her way. While he waited for her return, he explained to the Alcean Rangers what they were going to do.

* * * *

General Kozinski, commander of the 17th Corps of Spino, stood in the center of a huge circular shield wall. He watched as a portion of the shield wall peeled open to let the cavalry enter. One of the returning riders rode up to the general and dismounted.

“The enemy broke off and retreated towards the western perimeter,” reported Colonel Shellard.

“You did not pursue them?” questioned the general.

“No,” replied the colonel. “My regiment took heavy losses fighting the Alceans. I could not afford to allow them to be sucked into a trap.”

The general frowned. “A trap?” he echoed. “Are you saying that the Alceans did not retreat because their cause was lost?”

“The Alceans gave better account of themselves than we did,” the colonel replied. “They may not be as numerous as us, but I will not besmirch their fighting skills. I think we are up against the Alcean Rangers. They are the finest fighters in all of Alcea. No, General, I do not think they retreated because their cause is lost. I think they meant to draw us into a trap. I refused to oblige them.”

General Kozinski’s brow creased with concern. For a moment, he said nothing, pondering the potential effects of the colonel’s decision. He did not like not knowing where the enemy was, but eventually he realized that there were only three things the Alceans could do. They could attack the shield wall directly, which would be a fatal mistake on their part, or they could drive south to attack General Bledsoe, but the Baroukan general had three regiments protecting him. That made such a move unlikely, leaving the third option as the most probable.

“Take your men and head to the northern perimeter,” ordered the general. “I want the men posted up there to join us here. I will not leave them isolated and exposed to attack.”

Colonel Shellard saluted and mounted his horse. He rode a short distance to where his company commanders were waiting and explained their orders. With a shouted order to the shield wall, the defensive ring opened to allow the colonel and his men to leave. Colonel Shellard’s regiment was already down to half-strength from the fight with the Alcean Rangers, and he did not cherish the thought of riding through the woods with the Rangers unaccounted for. He led his men onto the Coastal Highway that split the camp in two and headed north. Well before he reached the northern perimeter, Colonel Shellard knew that trouble was brewing. A fiery glow in the distance lit the night, and soon the sounds of shouting reached his ears. He drew his sword.

“Prepare for battle!” he called to his men.

As the colonel drew nearer the barricade, he frowned in confusion. The flames he had seen from a distance were coming from the burning barricade, but the enemy was not attacking, unless you could call a lone mage standing in the middle of the road and sending sheets of fire into the wooden barricade an attack. The shouts of alarm came from the defenders of the perimeter as their arrows failed to harm the mage and their efforts to extinguish the flames were met with more flames. The colonel sheathed his sword, and his men followed his example.

“Rally to General Kozinski,” Colonel Shellard called out to the defenders. “The barricade is to be abandoned. Let it burn.”

The defenders seemed relieved to see the colonel’s column approaching, but their looks soon turned to horror. Surging out of the trees along the western side of the road, Alceans Rangers tore into the column without mercy. Colonel Shellard cursed loudly. The burning barricade had been a distraction that the Alceans used to get into position, and his carelessness had allowed it.

“Rally to me!” he shouted to the defenders of the barricade. “Rally to me!”

The companies manning the barricade responded immediately, knowing that the enemy outside the camp could not join the battle because of the very fires their mage had started. They drew their swords and raced towards the colonel.

“Shield wall across the road!” shouted Colonel Shellard as the barricade defenders drew near. “Riders retreat behind it!”

His commands were the standard Federation response to such an ambush. While the infantry maintained an impenetrable wall of shields, the cavalry would regroup behind it and then try to outflank

the enemy. It had been a very effective tactic in the Federation wars, but such was not the case in the Battle of Duranga. As soon as the barricade defenders had left their posts, the men of Tor flew their unicorns over the burning barricade. Their bows unleashed a deadly hail of arrows into the back of the shield wall. Colonel Shellard gasped loudly as he saw his plan disintegrate before his eyes. The shield wall was destroyed from behind while the Rangers crushed his regiment. In a desperate attempt to take some of the Alceans with him on his way to the grave, Colonel Shellard issued a war cry and charged for the man with the long blond tail. Only then did he notice the woman riding behind the black specter. Her hand rose and pointed directly at the colonel. An icy blue ball appeared in her hand and it flew towards him.

Colonel Shellard felt a deep chill invade his body as the blue orb hit him. He thought he had been about to die, but he did not die. He could not move, ice encrusting his entire body and that of his horse, but he could still see and hear. In fact, he could not even close his eyes to the horrors going on around him. He was forced to watch as the Alcean Rangers destroyed the remnants of his regiment. As silence fell over the battlefield, the Rangers moved past him towards the shield wall, leaving the frozen colonel to stare at nothing but the bodies of his slain men. Desperately wanting to know what his fate would be, the colonel listened intently to the soft sounds of talking some distance behind him.

“What a waste,” a deep male voice said softly. “If only they had surrendered when they had the opportunity. None of these young men would have died.”

“They were given the choice, Alex,” said a woman’s voice. “What is our next move?”

“We force General Kozinski to surrender, Jenneva,” Alex answered. “He has all of his remaining men gathered in one place, and they have no mages to stop us. I hope that he sees the wisdom in surrender, or we will be forced to kill thousands more.”

Colonel Shellard could not believe what he was hearing. He had heard stories of Alex and Jenneva during his visit to Tagaret last fall, but those stories made the famous couple seem too potent to be real. He had thought that they were mythical characters meant to idealize the Alcean wars. The colonel wondered if the shivers racing through his body was from the knowledge of who Team Miram was fighting, or if it was an effect of the ice surrounding him.

“General Bledsoe has kept three regiments in reserve,” warned Jenneva. “While I can guarantee the annihilation of the 17th Corps, I can not do so if those reserves come to the aid of General Kozinski. Shouldn’t we eliminate those reserves first?”

“Those reserves are from the 7th Corps of Barouk,” replied Alex. “They will not come to the aid of Spinoans. Trust me on this, Jenneva. They will not leave Bledsoe’s side. What do we do with the frozen colonel?”

“Leave him,” answered Jenneva. “He will remain frozen until morning. We will accept his surrender then.”

Alex and Jenneva walked away as they uttered those final words. They mounted their unicorns and led their army southward.

“How long will he really remain frozen?” Alex asked when they were well away from the frozen colonel.

“Not long,” answered Jenneva. “I warmed the horse’s legs so they will move, and Yorra instructed the horse to make its way towards the burning barricade. The heat from the fires will thaw the colonel. Are you sure that he will go directly to General Bledsoe?”

“He has little choice,” replied Alex. “He would not dare to follow us to Kozinski’s shield wall. Not after what he saw happen to his own regiment. Nor will he surrender before General Kozinski. His only option is to get Bledsoe to send the reserves north.”

“He could flee,” posed Jenneva.

Alex shook his head. “Sheri is a good judge of character, and she met him in Tagaret last fall. Shellard is no coward, and he is not a deserter. Clint also said that he was extremely loyal to Kozinski. The colonel will not flee. He will go to Bledsoe and demand the reserves.”

“Then we need to get Kozinski to surrender quickly,” stated Jenneva. “We truly can’t afford to be caught between the 17th Corps and the reserves from the 7th Corps.”

“That will be up to you mages,” Alex said. “I sent Bitsy to gather Balamor in case you need him.”

“Excellent,” Jenneva replied with a smile. “He has the power to cast a physical shield large enough to cover thousands of men. That will give Theos and me free reign to convince General Kozinski to surrender.”

“You intend to surround our entire army with a physical shield?” scoffed Alex. “Is that even possible?”

“Oh, it is quite possible, Alex,” grinned Jenneva, “but Balamor will not be putting a physical shield around us. He will be putting it around the 17th Corps of Spino.”

Chapter 47

Shield Wall

Sergeant Dilney was tired. His squad's sentry duty had ended only moments before the Battle of Duranga had begun, and he should have spent the past few hours sleeping rather than running around the huge encampment dodging Alcean warriors to report the battlefield progress to Colonel Shellard. The Federation sergeant was also nervous. The remnants of the 17th Corps of Spino were gathered in a huge circular shield wall, waiting in the dark for Colonel Shellard's regiment to return with the companies guarding the northern perimeter. That regiment was long overdue, and Sergeant Dilney had a sinking feeling that they were never coming back.

The sergeant was not alone in his feelings. An aura of gloom pervaded the shield wall of the 17th Corps, and the soldiers fidgeted nervously as their eyes strained to detect anything moving in the dark. Most of the remaining soldiers of the 17th Corps had had at least a glancing introduction to the night-fighting prowess of the Alcean Rangers, and while the shield wall gave them some measure of comfort, none of them were anxious to resume the fight before the sun rose to illuminate the forest. Many of them wished that the sun would hurry up and arrive. Moments later, they cursed that wish.

Unexpectedly, a brilliant flash of light illuminated the forest as it streamed skyward like a falling star in reverse. The flash briefly illuminated thousands of Alcean warriors in a ring around the shield wall, and each man sat upon the back of a horned unicorn. Hundreds of arrows immediately soared outward from the shield wall, but each arrow unexplainably halted and dropped to the ground as if it had hit an invisible wall. The rising star reached its zenith directly over the circle of Federation soldiers, and defying gravity, hung there illuminating the entire 17th Corps. Some soldiers raised their eyes to look at it, but the light was too intense. They quickly lowered their eyes, blinking to restore their vision.

Sergeant Dilney was not so foolish as to stare at the blinding light. His eyes scanned the Alcean ring to measure the strength of the enemy, but they stopped when he saw the same golden-haired warrior that he had seen at the western perimeter. The sergeant had a gut feeling that he was looking at the leader of the Rangers, a feeling that was strengthen by the three odd people surrounding him. Two red-headed men and one woman sat on unicorns near the golden-haired

warrior, and none of them carried a weapon. Sergeant Dilney found himself drawn towards them and did not realize that he was actually walking until he bumped into General Kozinski who was also heading towards the area of the shield wall opposite the four unique Alceans. The sergeant quickly apologized to the general, but Kozinski did not even acknowledge him. The general was staring intently at the Alceans.

"Your men will cease wasting their arrows," the golden-haired warrior demanded in a loud booming voice. "I am Alexander Tork, General Kozinski, and I have come to demand your surrender."

General Kozinski did not respond immediately. He turned in a slow circle gazing upon the enemy surrounding him. Eventually, he returned to face Alexander Tork.

"You are bold, Tork," stated the Spinoan general, "but no army can breech a Federation shield wall once it is properly situated. You seem to have more men than we had anticipated, but not enough to demand our surrender. I suggest you take your flag of truce and depart. I will not yield to you."

Sergeant Dilney shuddered as the golden-haired warrior actually smiled at the general's words.

"There is no flag of truce here, General," Alex retorted. "Let me explain the situation to you. Your men are not only surrounded by Alcean Rangers, they are also trapped inside a magic shield. That shield will prohibit the movement of anything physical through it. That is why your arrows failed to escape your circle. You cannot harm us, and you cannot leave. You are trapped until you surrender."

"We have no intention of leaving," countered the general. "This is a Federation shield wall. It is meant to stand against our foes, and stand it will. If your words are true about this magical barrier, then you have managed to outsmart yourself. If we can't leave, neither can you attack us. We merely have to wait for the 7th Corps to arrive to break this deadlock."

"Deadlock?" echoed Alex. "You truly do not understand. We are seeking your surrender to avoid killing all of you, but you are too stubborn to understand that. You seem to think that everyone should kneel before the all-mighty Federation, but it is time for you to learn the truth. Allow me to introduce you to one of the Tyronians whose country you recently savaged. I do not think you will enjoy his form of welcome. Theos, explain to General Kozinski what it means not to surrender."

"Gladly," replied one of the red-haired men.

Sergeant Dilney cringed as the Tyronian raised a hand and pointed it at the shield wall to the left of General Kozinski. Flames shot from the Tyronian's hand and passed through the invisible shield.

An entire squad burst into flames. Sergeant Dilney watched in horror as the men screamed and tried to put out the flames. Some of the men ran into the clear area behind the shield wall where others tried to extinguish the flames. Those were the lucky ones. Others tried to run the other way, and they ran headlong into the invisible shield, falling to the ground and screaming as the flames took their lives. None of the other soldiers were willing to leave the shield wall to go forward to help their stricken comrades.

"Our mages have no problem with sending spells through the magical wall," stated Alex. "It only affects physical objects. So you see, General, there is no deadlock here. You will surrender, or you will die."

"Before you stubbornly respond," the woman said quickly, "think of your men, General Kozinski. If you surrender, they will be fed and cared for until their eventual return to Spino. King Arik truly does not wish to kill them. Do not let your stubbornness deprive them of a return to their homes and families."

The words had been said to the general, but immediate murmurs broke out throughout the shield wall. The general frowned as he turned and looked at his soldiers. Each man he focused on immediately averted his eyes when the general looked at him. Kozinski sighed. He could almost feel the aura of defeat hanging over his army. Still, the 7th Corps was only a couple of thousand paces away. Surely he could figure out a way to stall until help arrived. As he surveyed his army, a small whirlwind appeared in the center of the circle of soldiers. The whirlwind started to grow in strength and size, and the general whirled around to glare at the Tyronian mage, but it was the woman whose arm was extended towards the Spinoans.

"You seem to have trouble making up your mind, General," she said, her voice loud and clear to the entire 17th Corps. "I will help you come to a decision. Any man who wishes to surrender may do so by throwing his weapons into the whirlwind. We will not harm anyone who does so. Those who keep their weapons will die before dawn."

Several soldiers did not hesitate. They immediately threw their swords and bows into the whirlwind, drawing cries of outrage and scorn from other soldiers. One of the offended soldiers drew his sword and ran towards one of those surrendering, shouts of vengeance on his lips. Theos raised his arm and sent a ball of fire into the sword-bearing soldier. The stricken man screamed in pain and fell to the ground, the flames devouring him. For a brief moment, the entire 17th Corps remained frozen. No one stepped forward to help the burning man, and no one else tried to threaten those surrendering.

"The most despicable act known to man," scowled Theos, "is to kill a brother who only wants to live to see his home and family again.

I will not see harm come to those who wish to surrender. If you think a soldier should fight to the death, you merely have to hold on to your own weapons. You will get your chance to die in the service of the Federation."

The Tyronian's words seemed to break the frozen mood of the 17th Corps. A few soldiers stepped out of the shield wall and threw their weapons into the whirlwind. Those few brave men seemed to open the faucet of reality. Within seconds, entire sections of the shield wall broke, the men tossing their weapons into a constantly growing whirlwind. General Kozinski watched helplessly as his army fell apart. He thought briefly about berating his men to get them to comply with his orders, but he sighed instead. His words alone would never overcome the hold that the Alceans held on the 17th Corps. With a heavy sigh of resignation, he drew his own sword and held it high over his head.

"The 17th Corps of Spino surrenders," he said loudly. "Each and every man will throw his weapons into the whirlwind. I will stand for no exceptions."

The general walked towards the whirlwind and threw his sword into it. As all of his men began to mimic his move, the general returned to face the Alcean leaders.

"We are surrendering honorably," he said to Alex. "I demand just treatment for my men as prisoners."

"And you shall have it," promised Alex. "As was said before, your men will be fed and cared for until their eventual return to Spino."

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Colonel Shellard slid off his horse and stood next to the fire. He was not sure how the horse had managed to move closer to the burning barricade, but he was thankful that it had. The ice had taken a long time to melt, and he was now drenched with wet clothes, but the warmth of the flames felt wonderful. He watched as steam rose off his clothes and wondered about drying the horse. He looked at it and shook his head, fearful that the exposure to ice might have harmed it. Beyond his horse were several others belonging to men of his regiment who no longer needed them. He tore himself away from the warmth of the fire and snagged one of the other horses. He pulled himself up and kicked the horse to life. Galloping southward along the Coastal Highway, the night breeze chilled him like it never had before. He pushed the discomfort from his mind and concentrated on reaching General Bledsoe. When he finally saw the Baroukan general, he sighed with relief.

"What happened to you?" called out Colonel Sawar. "Fall in a river?"

Colonel Shellard ignored the questions. He halted his horse and

dismounted, issuing a sharp salute to the general.

"The 17th Corps is in danger, General," Colonel Shellard said with a sense of urgency. "I need your reserves to save them."

"General Kozinski can take care of himself," scoffed General Bledsoe. "He is a fine general. Did he send you here?"

"No," Colonel Shellard replied.

"I thought not," stated General Bledsoe. "Explain yourself."

"My regiment was destroyed earlier," reported Colonel Shellard. "I alone survived, and that was only because of a freak occurrence. General Kozinski has the remains of the 17th Corps in a circular shield wall, waiting for the Alceans to attack, but has no idea what is heading towards him. I overheard them talking. They plan to use their mages to eliminate the entire 17th Corps."

"Preposterous," ridiculed General Bledsoe. "General Kozinski knows how to fight against mages. They die just like any other man."

"Or woman?" retorted Colonel Shellard. "The people I heard talking were Alex and Jenneva."

"Are you serious?" gasped Colonel Sawar. "I thought they were mythical?"

"They are real," replied Colonel Shellard.

"Who are these people?" demanded General Bledsoe.

"They are Knights of Alcea," answered Colonel Sawar. "The stories told about them in Tagaret appeared farfetched and exaggerated. That is why I thought they were mythical. According to one story, Jenneva used her magic to split a mountain in half, forcing half of it to fall on a goblin army."

"And she is not the only mage they have," interjected Colonel Shellard. "There is red-headed man who was with the Alceans opposite the northern perimeter. When I arrived there, he was using magic to burn the barricades. Our people could do nothing to stop him. Their arrows were blocked from reaching him somehow."

"I don't care how powerful she is," scowled General Bledsoe. "Two mages are not going to destroy ten-thousand men."

"The 17th Corps is no longer ten-thousand men," frowned Colonel Shellard. "We have already lost several thousand to the Alceans Rangers, including my entire regiment." The colonel sighed anxiously as he gazed into the unyielding face of General Bledsoe. "General, I was frozen by a magical spell cast at me when I tried to attack Alexander Tork. My horse was frozen, too. That is the only reason I survived the carnage at the northern perimeter. Every other man died to the Rangers. These are warriors unlike any other we have ever seen. To talk of their deeds might sound exaggerating, but if you tour the battlefield, you will not find many of their black-clad bodies on it. These men and their mages are not something to be ignored. I plead

with you to send the reserves to General Kozinski's aid. I came straight here to request them because I truly believe that they are the only hope for the 17th Corps."

The general frowned. "You came here explicitly to request my reserves?"

"Yes." The Spinoan colonel nodded. "Those three regiments will make all the difference in the world."

"And how did you know that I had held back three regiments?" asked the general. "I never notified General Kozinski about them."

It was the Spinoan's turn to frown. "Alex and Jenneva knew about them," he gasped. "I remember her saying that only those three regiments could foil their plan. She specifically called them reserves, and Alex said not to worry about them. He said that a Baroukan general would never send them to the aid of a Spinoan. How could she have known?"

"That is nonsense," scoffed Colonel Sawar. "Baroukans and Spinoans stand together in this team. Alex and Jenneva might be great heroes to Alcea, but they have made a fatal mistake with such foolish thoughts. Our reserves will crush them."

"You need to get some dry clothes on, Colonel," General Bledsoe said casually to the Spinoan colonel. "You may be called upon yet again this night. Best you be prepared."

"I will get him some clothes," offered Colonel Sawar.

"No," the general said quickly as he waved for a sergeant to join the group. "A lesser officer can handle such a duty. Go with the sergeant, Colonel Shellard. He will see that you get what you need."

The Spinoan colonel nodded, and the general instructed the sergeant. As soon as the two men were gone, Colonel Sawar frowned deeply and spoke softly to the general.

"You aren't thinking of holding up the reserves, are you?"

"Something stinks about this whole battle," stated the Baroukan general. "How many men were attacking from the south before they retreated?"

"Two or three thousand," answered the colonel. "The shield wall should easily hold them now that we have it properly assembled. We really can afford to send the reserves to help the Spinoans."

"Right." General Bledsoe nodded. "That much is obvious, so what are we missing?"

"Missing?" echoed the colonel. "I don't understand."

"The Alceans are toying with us, Colonel," explained the general. "They actually want us to send the reserves northward. That is why they allowed Colonel Shellard to hear them talking, and that is why they added the part about Baroukans not wanting to help Spinoans. That comment was made specifically to make it harder to refuse the

request."

"You think Alex and Jenneva intentionally let Shellard live?"

"Absolutely. If we are to believe that the Alcean Rangers and their mages are truly capable of annihilating the entire 17th Corps, why would they be so foolish as to leave an officer alive who could conveniently carry their words to me? It makes no sense. They want my reserves removed from here, but they don't have the numbers necessary to breech our shield wall, so they should never even make it this far. What is their real plan? How are they getting through the shield wall?"

"Do you think they mean to outflank the shield wall?" asked the colonel.

"No," answered the general. "To do so would put them between Kozinski and us. Besides, drawing the reserves north would hamper their own efforts if they meant to outflank us. Unlike the shield wall, the reserves are mounted. They can react with great speed."

"Unless they are eliminated," gasped the colonel. "The attack on the 17th Corps is probably a ruse. The Rangers seek to take on our reserves and eliminate them. That is the real plan."

The general nodded. "That is what I am thinking, and that is precisely why our reserves are staying put. Get back to your shield wall, Colonel. Expect a desperate attack from the south. Hold that line and crush our enemies. Bring me the head of King Arik."

Colonel Sawar saluted and ran for his horse. In the dark, hovering over General Bledsoe, a tiny, green man also departed, but his wings carried him much faster than any horse could run. Prince Midge darted upward and soared southward. Within moments, he landed on the shoulder of King Arik.

"The reserves will not be leaving General Bledsoe's side," Prince Midge reported. "He is expecting your charge on the shield wall, and he is keeping those three regiments in reserve. Our plans have failed."

"A plan has failed," corrected the King of Alcea, "but the night is not over, and I am not out of plans. Bitsy just brought encouraging news from the north, and that brings another plan to mind. I need you to carry a message to Alex for me."

King Arik gave the message to Prince Midge and sent him on his way. He then asked David Jaynes to assemble the Red Swords so that he could explain the new battle plan. Once the men were assembled, the king explained to them what he expected from them. When he was finished, he drew the Sword of Heavens and held it high over his head.

"The Red Swords are among the finest fighters in the world," the king said loudly, "and tonight you will get the chance to prove it. You will be called upon to ride faster than you ever have and kill quicker

than any man should be expected to kill. You will show the enemy no mercy, for if we fail this night, Alcea will die. Only your speed and expertise will win this battle, but I know that you will prevail. You are the Red Swords!"

"And you are the Warrior King!" shouted one of the men.

All of the men then shouted, "Long live the Warrior King!" The shouting was so loud that King Arik was sure that the Baroukans up the road must have heard it.

* * * *

Colonel Sawar arrived at the shield wall and tied his horse to a tree. He then walked the entire line telling the men to prepare for an attack. When he reached the end of the line, he turned around and began walking back. He was almost halfway along the shield wall when he heard the distant shouts. He stopped and stared at the road passing through the middle of the shield wall. The clouds had passed away from the moon, and he could see a fair distance, but there was nothing for him to see. The road was empty.

"They're coming, aren't they, Colonel?" one of the men in the wall asked.

"I suspect they are," the colonel replied with a curt nod. "Let's show them what a Federation shield wall can do when properly assembled."

"For the empire!" shouted one of the soldiers.

"For Barouk!" shouted thousands in response.

A smile appeared on the colonel's face, but it didn't last long. As the sound of the shouting died, he heard the distant thunder of thousands of hooves. The Alceans were coming, and they were not coming slowly. They were galloping towards the shield line.

"They are coming in fast!" he shouted. "Stand firm and deliver death to the enemy! Hold this line!"

Colonel Sawar squinted into the night, focusing intently on the Coastal Highway. Far in the distance he saw shadows moving, and the pounding hooves grew louder. He watched as the shadows resolved into visible forms, Alcean riders hunched low for maximum speed. He could tell that the Alceans were planning to slam into the shield wall at full speed, but he also knew that such a tactic would fail. He had chosen a place for the shield wall that would allow for maximum exposure to the enemy with little room for cavalry maneuvering. So many archers would be concentrated on the charging column that none of the horses would even reach the shield wall.

"Tighten the line in the center!" he shouted as he watched the charging Alceans draw closer.

Suddenly, a blast of wind roared out of the south. The wind was far greater than what he had personally experienced earlier in the

night. In fact, it was far stronger than any storm he had ever experienced. He immediately moved back and grabbed onto a tree. The men in the shield wall could not do so. The wind tore into the Federation line with tremendous force, and men were lifted off the ground and carried away, but curiously, only in the center of the shield wall. Within seconds, there was a gaping hole in the shield wall, and the Alceans galloped towards it. Colonel Sawar gripped the tree tightly with both arms and sheltered behind it so he could still see the road.

A sudden sound split the air. It was a sound that the colonel had heard only once before in his life, and it sent a shiver racing down his spine. It was the roar of a dragon. He swallowed hard as a flying shape appeared over the approaching Alcean column. With disbelief, Colonel Sawar watched the dragon approach. The monstrous creature glided almost silently, its huge wings nearly touching the trees on both sides of the road, but the greatest shock to the colonel was the sight of the Warrior King upon the creature's back. Shouts of fear roared from the mouths of the shield wall, but King Arik and his dragon did not attack. The dragon soared over the shield wall and continued northward. Seconds later, another dragon appeared with the Warrior Queen on its back. As they passed over the shield wall, the queen's arms flew out to her sides. Tremendous gusts of wind tore from her fingertips in both directions. The men of the shield wall were blown away from the road, cascading into one another like falling dominoes. A moment later, the colonel watched as flames leaped from the queen's hands, the sheets of flames streaking, not into the soldiers of the shield wall, but rather into the trees lining the road behind the shield wall. The trees burst into flames as the vanguard of the Alcean column raced through the gaping hole in the shield wall.

Colonel Sawar gasped in amazement as he watched the Alceans gallop through the shield wall. It took several moments for him to realize that the wind had dissipated. He let go of the tree and watched his men scrambling away from the forest fire. It took another moment for him to realize what was happening. Not a single Alcean attacked the shield wall, and if any of the Baroukans had fired an arrow, they had missed. There was not a single Alcean body on the ground. Suddenly, he understood the Alcean plan.

"Rally to Bledsoe!" the colonel shouted. "Rally to Bledsoe!"

Chapter 48

Day Thirteen

"Enemy sighted," growled Wyka. "Are you sure I can't eat them?"

King Arik strained to see General Bledsoe and his three regiments of reserves, but his eyes were not as good as the dragon's. "You may kill with abandon," he answered, "but you will not eat a human. There will be more horsemeat on the battlefield than you and Rylana can possibly devour. Quit complaining."

"Grump," retorted Wyka.

"Light the battlefield as soon as you see it, Tanya," called the king, ignoring the dragon's banter.

Hearing the king's command, Rylana put forth a burst of speed and rose over Wyka and King Arik. "One thousand paces forward," she said. "Can you see them?"

Queen Tanya did not reply. She took the dragon's word as accurate and raised her arm. A brilliant light flared to life at her fingertips and arced into the sky. When it reached the prescribed distance, it burst into a brilliance like a tiny sun hanging high over General Bledsoe's position.

"That is sure to announce our arrival," quipped Rylana.

"Then let the killing begin," the queen replied stoically.

And begin it did. The Federation soldiers of the reserves gazed upward, holding the reins of the mounts standing beside them. They gawked at the magical light above them as the two dragons glided silently towards them. Wyka and Rylana split up upon reaching the clearing where General Bledsoe had decided to make his stand. Wyka banked left and Rylana banked right. From opposite sides, the dragons swooped over the reserves, their talons reaching down and goring the heads of the soldiers. Flames leaped from their mouths searing scores of men, while Arik and Tanya threw Lanoirian stars as quickly as they could pull them from the pouches on their waists.

Chaos swept over the Federation troops as man and beast tried to react to the sudden attack. Men shouted in alarm, and horses screamed with fear. Some men tried to mount their horses; some drew their swords. Still others, seeing the threat as too distant for close combat, dropped their reins so that both hands were free to handle bows and arrows. Free horses broke in every direction as the two dragons raced over the reserves, and the din of confusion and terror made it impossible for the officers' orders to be heard. At the end of

their run, both dragons banked sharply, Rylana shooting high into the sky to avoid the arrows being nocked below. Wyka, however, was not done toying with the soldiers. She maintained her sharp bank for another pass.

"Behold Dragon Heart upon my back!" bellowed Wyka. "Kneel and yield to him or die!"

King Arik drew the Sword of Heavens as Wyka soared towards the reserves once again. When she reached the beginning of the line, she spied a soldier who had managed to mount his horse. The man was desperately trying to get his horse to leave the area, but it was too crowded for him to make progress. She adjusted her path straight towards him. She snapped her jaws shut around the man, ripping him from the saddle. She then sunk her talons deep into the horse and lifted it off the ground, tossing the soldier's body aside. With her powerful wings propelling her forward, she dragged the horse into the crowd. Man and beast alike were plowed out of the dragon's path as the horse carcass smashed everything it met with an explosive force. King Arik, on Wyka's back, reached out with the Sword of Heavens. The magical sword's blade sliced through the necks of anyone who had managed to just miss being hit by the horse carcass. Together, Dragon Heart and the Queen of the Dragons cut a swath through the reserves of the 7th Corps of the Empire of Barouk.

Small groups of soldiers, who had managed to split from the column during the initial pass, nocked arrows and waited for the dragon to come within range. Before they had a chance to fire their arrows, lightning bolts shot down out of the night sky and struck in the middle of each group, the soldiers' bodies flying through the air and creating even greater chaos among the reserves. As Wyka neared the end of her pass, she tossed the horse at the last of the men and shot upward. That was when the Red Swords arrived on the battlefield. As the Red Swords tore into the Federation reserves, King Arik sheathed the Sword of Heavens and glanced down at the battlefield. He saw a squad of soldiers standing tensely apart from the others and saw General Bledsoe in the middle of them. He roused Prince Midge from his pocket.

"I need to be warned of the approach of the men from the shield wall," instructed the Bringer.

"You will be able to see them easily from up here," replied the fairy prince.

"I will be down there," declared King Arik as he pointed to the group around General Bledsoe. "Warn me in time to make preparations."

"You will know of their arrival before they do," promised Prince Midge. He flared his wings wide and let the air current whip him off

the king's shoulder.

King Arik signaled Queen Tanya, and both dragons dropped into a steep dive towards General Bledsoe and the twenty men guarding him.

"Shall I even the odds?" Wyka asked as they shot downward.

"No," answered Dragon Heart. "I cannot afford for General Bledsoe to die, even by accident. You and Rylana will return to harassing the reserves. Keep their attention divided between the Red Swords and you. When the Rangers arrive, return to the sky and watch for the men of the shield wall. I may need for you and Rylana to slow them down."

"As Dragon Heart commands," Wyka replied, "but one seldom dies of fright."

While King Arik was still puzzling over the dragon's comment, Wyka's wings suddenly beat faster, and the dragon leveled off just above the ground. She flew straight at General Bledsoe. The general's bodyguards quickly pushed the general to the ground and covered him with their bodies, but the dragon did not attack. Wyka flew over the small group of men and landed, King Arik quickly sliding to the ground. Rylana landed next to Wyka, and Queen Tanya quickly moved to stand next to the king. The dragons immediately returned to the air. The king and queen filled their hands with Lanoirians stars and ran towards the soldiers. While the bodyguards were still rising to their feet, the Warrior King and the Warrior Queen halted their advance and attacked by throwing their stars. Their practiced aim was deadly. The falling bodies slowed the rising of other soldiers, but eventually enough of them rose to dictate a change in tactics. Arik and Tanya drew their swords as some of the soldiers raced towards them.

Striding slowly forward in a well-rehearsed battle dance, Arik and Tanya met the enemy, keeping just enough space between them to allow each to maneuver without hindering the other, yet not enough space to allow the enemy to come between them. The Alcean warriors met the enemy confidently, their long, two-handed swords reaching out to slay their foes before the soldiers could reach their target. As the Federation bodies piled up, an arrow slammed into King Arik's chest, its impact driving the Warrior King back a step. The arrow, instead of penetrating deep into the king's body, struck the Breastplate of Alcea, worn under the king's tunic, and fell to the ground. The three remaining swordsmen attacking the royal couple gasped and their attack faltered for just a moment. The pause was long enough for one of Queen Tanya's hands to leave the hilt of her sword and send a magical projectile at the archer behind the soldiers. His lifeless body flew through the air and slammed into a tree. The faces of the attackers paled as they stared at the queen. They backed away from the Alceans and stood directly in front of General Bledsoe, who also

held his sword ready.

"Yield, General Bledsoe," King Arik said as he and Queen Tanya slowly strode forward. "End this unnecessary bloodshed."

"You have only moments to live," the general replied. "Flee while you can."

King Arik extended the Sword of Heavens before him and moved closer to the general. The three remaining soldiers tensed, ready to spring forward and sacrifice their lives to protect the general. King Arik glanced at them and shook his head in warning.

"Enough blood has already stained these grounds," scowled the Warrior King. "Do not add yours to it. I am seeking a surrender, not a massacre."

General Bledsoe glanced over at the reserves and the Red Swords battling as if wondering when his troops would come to his aid. Instead he witnessed the arrival of the Rangers and the Men of Tor. He knew the battle was now lost unless…

"General Kozinski and the 17th Corps have already surrendered," stated Queen Tanya. "The only thing you have left is the men of your shield wall, and they will be destroyed just as easily as the rest of your armies. Must all of your men die to satisfy your ego?"

The general whipped his head towards the queen and glared at her. He was about to call her bluff, but as he gazed into her eyes, he knew that he was hearing the truth. At that moment, Prince Midge swooped down and landed on the king's shoulder.

"The men of the shield wall will be arriving in moments," announced the fairy prince. "Should I order the attack?"

The Baroukans gasped and stared at the tiny man. All night long, the Alceans seemed to know everything the Federation was doing. Suddenly, the source of the Alceans' knowledge became clear. The general pushed aside his men and stepped forward. He grasped the blade of his sword, extending the hilt towards King Arik.

"Allow one of my men to sound the surrender," he pleaded. "Enough have died."

King Arik accepted the sword and nodded. General Bledsoe instructed one of his soldiers to sound the surrender. The man dropped his sword and ran off in search of a horn. Moments later, the sound of the horn pierced the air. The fighting stopped almost immediately, and a stillness pervaded the battlefield for a moment. As the true significance of the horn dawned on the members of the reserve regiments, they stabbed their swords into the ground and walked towards the general. They quietly formed ranks and stood silently, awaiting the general's orders. Moments later, Colonel Sawar led the vanguard of the shield wall into the clearing. The men had clearly been running hard for some time, but now they walked slowly.

Alexander Tork met them as they entered the clearing.

"The swords stay here," Alex said to the colonel.

Colonel Sawar nodded and stabbed his sword into the ground. He then stepped out of the column and stood alongside the Knight of Alcea, instructing his men to leave their swords and form ranks. By the time the end of the column entered the clearing, dawn was already lightening the sky. The thirteenth day of the War in Alcea had begun.

* * * *

As dawn broke over Lizard Hill, two Federation generals met inside the large command tent. The acrimonious exchange was loud enough to be heard outside the tent.

"The 9th Corps carried the weight of battle yesterday," scowled General Kolling. "Today the 25th Corps will take its turn."

"There was no reason for battle yesterday," retorted General Gertz, "and there certainly isn't any reason for battle today. We should bypass the bloody hill and be on our way to Ongchi. You were the one trying to avoid delays. Why now are you intent on fighting for a hill that has no meaning? There are only a hundred or so Lanoirians left alive up there."

"Then it shouldn't take a full corps of Aerta's finest very long to conquer them," spat the Baroukan general. "Stop arguing, Gertz. I am the leader of Team Barouk, and you will follow my orders. I want every last one of those Lanoirians destroyed. Get out there and get your men ready to assault that hill."

Before the Aertan general could respond, the tent flap flew open and Colonel Ednor of the 9th Corps of the Empire of Barouk entered the tent.

"A flag of truce flies at the base of Lizard Hill," the colonel reported. "Perhaps the Lanoirians have realized that there is no hope for their position."

The eyebrows of General Gertz rose with hope, but General Kolling was not pleased.

"You tend to the parley, Colonel," he snapped. "I have no time for such nonsense. When she offers to surrender, tell her no."

"That is not right," objected General Gertz. "You are either the team leader or you are not. It is your responsibility as team leader to negotiate with the enemy. You cannot delegate that to an inferior officer."

"I can do whatever I want," snarled General Kolling. "Do not tell me my place." The tent fell silent for a moment and then the Baroukan general continued in a more controlled manner. "Although, it might give me pleasure to watch Rut-ki's face when I refuse her offer of surrender. Let's see how she controls her emotions then. Come along,

Gertz. We have a parley to attend."

General Kolling stormed out of the tent. General Gertz sighed with frustration and then turned to the colonel.

"Join us, Colonel. I think it is time for you to become more informed of the affairs of the 9th Corps."

The colonel's brow creased at the general's odd offer, but he dutifully followed General Gertz out of the tent. The two men hurried to catch up to General Kolling, but they slowed again as they drew near, leaving the Baroukan general walking several paces before them. Colonel Ednor glanced across the valley as they descended the hill. He saw a lone woman and her mount.

"Is that the one called Rut-ki?" he asked the Aertan general.

General Gertz nodded. "Do not mistake her mount for a horse," he warned softly. "That is the unicorn you saw flying through the sky yesterday. It almost killed General Kolling the last time we met with Rut-ki. First it threw him to the ground and then it almost gored him with its horn."

"Is it that hard a creature to ride?" the colonel asked in confusion.

"Not at all," answered the general. "They are beautiful creatures, far superior to even the Occans back home. Kolling made the mistake of using his spurs. He said that the creature spoke inside his mind and threatened to drag his body along the road if he ever did that again."

"It spoke to him?" gasped the colonel.

"It did," chuckled the general. "You should have seen his face. I am not surprised that he did not share that with you."

"He shared nothing about the last parley with me," frowned the colonel. "I guess he no longer has confidence in me."

"Do not take it personally, Colonel," the general said sympathetically. "I don't think this war has been going the way he expected. I think we have all underestimated our enemy, and Kolling has a hard time accepting that."

General Kolling glared back at the other officers, and they fell silent, fearful that he might have been able to hear their words. Nothing more was said before they halted a few paces in front of Rut-ki.

"Good morning, General Kolling," Rut-ki opened with an impassive face, "General Gertz, and…" Rut-ki paused for only a moment as if sifting through the faces in her memory. "Colonel Ednor. Thank you for coming so early in the day."

The colonel's eyebrows rose. He was sure that he had never met Rut-ki before yet she seemed to recognize him.

"There is little time before the start of battle," General Kolling said brusquely. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Surrender, General Kolling," answered the Knight of Alcea. "It is

time to end the bloodshed."

"It took you long enough to realize that, Rut-ki," General Kolling said with a slight smile, "but I will not accept your surrender. Your people have inflicted great harm on my army, and I demand my revenge. Return to your people and tell them to prepare to die."

General Kolling watched Rut-ki's face closely for any sign of emotion. He was disappointed when it showed none.

"My people were prepared to die yesterday, General," Rut-ki replied, "and far too many of them did, but you continue to misunderstand me. I am here to offer you one last opportunity to surrender."

"You should at least learn to smile when you joke," scowled General Kolling. "You can't have more than two-hundred men left alive up there. You expect me to surrender to that?"

Rut-ki half turned and waved her hand towards the summit of Lizard Hill as she spoke. "One-hundred-fifty survived your attack yesterday, but we accomplished our goal. We have delayed the advance of Team Barouk, and now you are left with only two choices. You may surrender here and now, or you will all die."

Colonel Ednor gasped and the two generals turned to see what he saw. They followed his gaze to the top of Lizard Hill and saw it lined with Lanoirian soldiers. For several moments the three Federation officers scanned the ridge of Lizard Hill. From the head to the tail, thousands of Lanoirian soldiers stood shoulder-to-shoulder. Finally, General Kolling spat defiantly in Rut-ki's direction. He turned abruptly and strode off towards his tent. General Gertz and Colonel Ednor stood staring at the thousands of enemy soldiers. Eventually, General Gertz lowered his eyes and met Rut-ki's gaze.

"The men from Hun-lo Heights?" asked the general.

Rut-ki nodded. "You are outnumbered, General. Worse, your men are starving and exhausted. We have the high ground, and you have nowhere to run. And if you did have somewhere to run, we have the cavalry to run you down. Your cause is lost. Accept the inevitable, and let your men live to return to their wives and children."

Colonel Ednor raised an eyebrow when the Aertan general asked Rut-ki for an hour to think about it. She quickly agreed, but the colonel knew that General Gertz did not have the authority to surrender. Only General Kolling could do so, and Colonel Ednor knew that was not going to happen. When General Gertz turned and started back towards the camp, the colonel raced after him.

"Surely you aren't thinking of trying to persuade General Kolling to surrender?" asked the colonel. "You must know him well enough by now to understand that he will never surrender."

"What point is there in continuing the fight?" asked the general.

“We will not win. Everything Rut-ki said is true. The 9th Corps demonstrated that yesterday. Men cannot fight when they are weakened by fatigue and starved for lack of food. Our morale couldn’t get any lower than it already is. What is the point?”

“Even if we lost,” posed the colonel, “we would take a good deal of the Lanoirian army with us. That would leave the way open for the other teams.”

“There are no other teams, Colonel,” retorted the general. “We are all there is in Lanoir.”

“I know that you and General Kolling have been speculating about such a situation,” frowned the colonel, “but you cannot know for sure.”

General Gertz stopped walking and faced the colonel. He frowned deeply as he stared in the colonel’s face.

“Kolling really has kept you in the dark, hasn’t he? Team Elmor and Team Chi have surrendered, Colonel. That is not a rumor or speculation. It is a fact. We learned that the very first time we saw Rut-ki.”

“But you cannot take the word of the enemy on such matters,” protested Colonel Ednor.

“I am not taking her word,” replied the general. “I am taking the words of Generals Somma, Ruppert, and Hanold. They were at the first parley. General Franz couldn’t make the meeting. He was already dead.”

Colonel Ednor gasped loudly. “Then we have known about this for two days already?”

General Gertz nodded.

“All of those men who died in the last two days have died for nothing?” scowled the colonel. “How many Lanoirians are up there waiting for us?”

“Over fifteen-thousand,” answered the general. “They are the army that accepted the surrender of Team Elmor. The smaller army that defeated Team Chi is what we have been battling so far.”

“We are doomed,” sighed the colonel. After a moment of thought, the colonel’s eyes narrowed with suspicion as he gazed at the general. “Why are you telling me all of this now? You and I both know that General Kolling will not surrender.”

“I agree,” replied the general, “but I will.”

“You can’t,” balked the colonel. “General Kolling is the team leader. He will not allow you to surrender.”

“And how will he stop me?” asked the Aertan general. “Will he order the 9th Corps to attack the 25th Corps?”

The colonel gasped in horror and nodded. “You know that he will.”

“I have seen the state of the 9th Corps, Colonel,” stated the general, “and I have seen the numbers of the Lanoirians. Which army do you think I would choose to engage if I had to pick one?”

“The 9th Corps is but a shell of its former might,” sighed the colonel. “The 25th Corps would destroy us easily, but I cannot believe that you look forward to us fighting each other.”

“I most certainly do not,” agreed the general. “Enough Federation blood has already flowed into the Lanoirian soil.”

Both men walked in silence for a long time, their troubled thoughts centered on the possible battle between two allied forces. Neither of the men was happy with the situation. When they finally reached the Federation camp, the soldiers were preparing for battle. None of the men seemed eager to engage the Lanoirians who were now visible to the entire camp. The two officers halted outside the large command tent.

“It would seem that your sword will be bloodied today,” the general said softly to the colonel. “You have a short time to decide who its victim will be.”

The colonel turned and looked at the Aertan general and saw him looking at the tent flap of the large command tent. He clearly understood the Aertan’s suggestion to kill General Kolling.

“You cannot be suggesting what I think you are suggesting?” gasped the colonel. “That would be treason.”

General Gertz smiled thinly. “I know nothing of what you are talking about, Colonel. I know nothing about it now, and I assure you, I will know nothing about it later.”

The four guards posted outside the large command tent watched the two officers whispering to each other. They could not hear the words being spoken, but they could easily sense the furtiveness of the conversation. The colonel bit his lip as the internal conflict tore through his mind.

“Either way you must enter the tent,” the general said softly. “You either enter it to save the lives of your men, or you enter it to inform General Kolling that the 25th Corps is surrendering to the Lanoirians. I do not envy your task, but there is no other who can perform it. Good luck, Colonel.”

General Gertz turned and walked away leaving the colonel standing before the large command tent. The colonel turned and glanced at the four guards. Each of them immediately averted his eyes. Colonel Ednor knew right then that the guards suspected what the conversation had been about. He turned slowly and watched as the Federation soldiers prepared for battle. The men moved sluggishly as if preparing for a deed best avoided. The whole camp knew that they were going to die. He could see it in their faces and their

movements. He turned back to the guards and nodded his head to one side, an unspoken order to leave their post. Not one of the men hesitated. They silently moved away from the tent and never looked back.

Colonel Ednor inhaled deeply, drawing on his courage to attempt the most vile of deeds. He straightened and marched towards the tent, throwing the flap back as he entered. General Kolling glanced up with a glare.

“What do you want, Ednor?” scowled General Kolling. “Have we so few men left that you have time to dally while they prepare for battle?”

The colonel smiled slightly. “I have a thought about the upcoming battle,” stated the colonel. “We might be able to save thousands of lives if things are handled correctly. Do you have the map of this area handy?”

The general raised an eyebrow in surprise and nodded. He bent down to pick up a map that was resting on the floor. When he straightened up, a knife flew across the table and struck him in the chest. The general gasped in pain, and he stared down at the knife sticking out of his chest. His face filled with rage, and his hand grasped the hilt of the knife. The colonel quickly drew his sword to finish off the general, but it proved unnecessary. As the general pulled the knife from his chest, his body tumbled to the floor. The battle for Lanoir was over.

Chapter 49

Watling Flats

As the sun rose over Duranga, King Arik and his advisors met in the common room of a deserted inn.

"What have the fairies reported, Prince Midge?" asked the king.

"Colonel Tamora leads the men of the 2nd Corps of Barouk," answered the fairy prince. "They are moving on Tagaret as we speak. Colonel Hershey leads the Aertans of the 24th Corps. While they are also moving towards Tagaret, they appear to be operating separately from the Baroukans. The two armies are separated by at least a league."

"They have had a falling out," mused Alex. "I am not surprised."

"Do you think they will band together to fight against us?" asked Mitar Vidson.

"That would be most unfortunate," frowned Alex. "I think we should plan to attack them separately, but only one league of separation will make things rather difficult. We would have to gain a quick surrender from the 2nd Corps and disarm all of the men before the 24th Corps arrived. Should we fail to do that, they will most certainly join together, and the battlefield would be too chaotic for our purposes."

"Colonel Tamora could stall indefinitely during negotiations," frowned David Jaynes. "All he has to do is keep the flag of truce flying long enough. He knows that we will not attack him under such circumstances. He would also be aware of the 24th Corps coming along behind him. I don't see how we can accomplish this. Maybe we should attack the 24th Corps from behind and then deal with the 2nd Corps."

"No," King Arik said forcefully. "The 24th Corps is more likely to surrender than the 2nd Corps. If we are to do battle this day, it will be against Colonel Tamora and his Baroukans. Colonel Tamora and his men must fall."

"You plan to fight them?" questioned Mitar Vidson.

"I do," the king affirmed. "I would rather fight ten-thousand men than chance a fight against twenty-thousand men. The 2nd Corps must be destroyed, and it must be destroyed quickly. When the 24th Corps arrives at the battlefield, I want them to know that continuing this war would be fruitless. I will demand their surrender at that point."

"Our men will be exhausted by the time we get there," frowned

David Jaynes. “That is supposing that we can even get to them before they reach Tagaret. Even if we left this very moment, I doubt that we would arrive in time to stop them from reaching the walls of Tagaret.”

“The Red Swords will not be going, David,” replied the king. “We have only enough unicorns for the Men of Tor and the Rangers. You and the Red Swords will be left here to secure the prisoners from the 7th Corps and the 17th Corps.”

“Two-thousand men against ten-thousand?” questioned Mitar Vidson. “And those two-thousand have been up all night fighting the Battle of Duranga. You are risking much with this plan.”

King Arik nodded. “We do what must be done. May the gods be with us.”

“Prince Garong and the elves of Elderal will also be with us,” interjected Alex. “Perhaps we can also order the Army of the West and the Cordonian Army to accelerate their movement eastward.”

“Prince Garong and his people will be a welcome addition,” stated Queen Tanya, “but the others will not be battle worthy. They are too far behind. If they race to make it to the battle, they will be exhausted.”

“Understood,” countered Alex, “but their arrival would be a powerful inducement for the 24th Corps to surrender. The sight of another twelve-thousand men behind the Aertans will guarantee an immediate surrender. I am confident of that.”

The king nodded and turned towards the fireplace where Prince Midge was holding court on the mantle. The fairy prince was sending and receiving fairy messengers to and from every spot in the kingdom, keeping abreast of the other teams.

“Can the Army of the West arrive in time to be a factor, Prince Midge?” the king asked.

“That depends on where the battle is held,” answered the fairy prince as he held up his hand to forestall a reporting fairy. “They are incapable of reaching Tagaret today, even if they push hard, but if the battle were held further west, the odds would improve greatly.”

“That would give our people less time to prepare for battle,” frowned Mitar Vidson.

“Watling Flats,” Alex said decisively. “It is a half day west of the city. It is the perfect battlefield for what we must do.”

The king nodded solemnly. Watling Flats was the battlefield where King Arik defeated the prophet Azmet and his followers of Abuud. It was the battle that had cost Wylan his sight. The sudden thought of Wylan stirred great emotion in the king’s heart. He wondered how Zalaharic was making out with the healing of Wylan and Sheri.

“General Barbone surrendered Team Caldar yesterday,” Prince

Midge announced loudly, “and Bin-lu reports that Rut-ki has managed to devastate Team Barouk. He is anticipating the enemy’s surrender this very morning.”

Shouts of joy filled the common room, but the celebration was short lived.

“That leaves only Team Mya threatening Alcea,” declared the king. “I want this war over today. Alex, you are familiar with Watling Flats. Go there immediately and survey the battlefield. I will be along shortly with the Rangers and the Men of Tor.”

Alexander Tork nodded. “Jenneva will be joining me. May I also take our red-headed friends?”

The king raised an eyebrow at Alex’s request to take the mages with him, but he did not need a lengthy explanation of the reason for the request to answer it. Instead he looked to the queen for her response. Theos was, after all, supposed to be protecting the king.

“I see no problem with that,” answered Queen Tanya. “My magic will be sufficient to protect you here. Give Alex whatever he needs.”

The king nodded, and Alex turned to leave the meeting. Jenneva, Theos and Balamor followed. Without a word, they mounted their unicorns and took to the air. Before they had even risen far, Alex woke Bitsy and sent her on her way to find Prince Garong. An hour later, they landed in the great meadow called Watling Flats. For several moments after they landed, Alex sat on Kaz and gazed around the meadow. Flashes of memories of the Battle of Watling Flats flooded his mind, and he sighed with sadness. It was not a sadness for the outcome of the previous battle, for the Alceans had won a decisive victory, but rather a sadness for the amount of blood that has already been spilled to live in peace. He shook off his emotions and turned Kaz to the east. The others followed.

When he reached the eastern edge of the meadow, Alex continued along the Mya-Tagaret Road for another half league. That half league of road was bordered on both sides by thick forest. He dismounted and stared up at the treetops. The mages had also dismounted and they also stared up, wondering what was going through Alex’s mind.

“How does a tree mine work?” Alex asked softly.

Jenneva raised an eyebrow. Alex had never shown much interest in magic, and she could not remember him ever asking how a spell worked before.

“It is a magical force that swiftly expands the saps within a tree,” answered Balamor. “That rapid expansion of saps blasts apart the fibers of the tree. It all happens so quickly that it results in a large explosion, sending slivers of wood flying in all directions. The upper part of the tree, no longer having anything to rest upon, crashes to the ground.”

“But how is it aimed?” asked Alex. “And what determines the size of the blast?”

“It is an area spell,” answered Jenneva. “The size can be whatever the mage wants it to be, within reason, but there is seldom reason to vary it. As for aiming it, think of it as throwing a stone. If the tree is fairly close, it is hard to miss, but if you choose a tree quite distant, the odds of missing increase. What is going through your mind, Alex?”

“I want to create a barrier of abatis across this road,” answered Alex, “but there is not time for our men to do it. We have only hours before the 2nd Corps will arrive.”

“And you want us to use tree mines to fell the trees?” scoffed Theos. “I don’t think that will work as you expect.”

“I think it might,” Alex responded distractedly as he drew his knife and approached one of the trees.

Alex knelt next to the tree and gazed upward and then looked back at the road. He dug his knife into the bark and cut some of it away. When he was done, an elliptical bare spot appeared on the trunk. He stood up and backed away.

“If one of you could fashion a tree mine to destroy only the portion of the tree that I have exposed,” Alex said, “we will find out if you will make good lumbermen.”

Jenneva grinned. “Alex used to be a lumberman, Theos,” she said. “I think this just might work. Let’s move back and I will give it a try.”

They all moved back and Jenneva cast the spell. A large chunk of the tree exploded outward in a flurry of wooden splinters, but the rest of the trunk remained unscathed. For a moment it looked to the mages as if the spell had failed to achieve their goal, but then the tree groaned loudly and leaned towards the west. They watched in amazement as the large tree crashed to the ground, landing squarely in the center of the road with its uppermost branches facing the west.

“Excellent!” grinned Alex. “I will mark all of the trees I need felled. If the three of you can work together to share the work, we will be done in no time.”

“Why here?” Theos asked with a puzzled expression. “I thought the battle was to be fought in the meadow, and we are over half a league east of that.”

“The 2nd Corps has already lost its cavalry,” explained Alex. “If we account for the loss of their horses and the riders who rode them, this place will mark the location of the vanguard when the tail exits the meadow. The initial attack should occur here. The men will try to rush back into the meadow, but I want them greatly bloodied before that happens. If Prince Garong can accommodate the plan, his elves will be lining both sides of the road between here and the meadow. The Rangers and the Men of Tor will then attack the rear of the

column."

"A devastating attack if you can pull it off," replied Theos, "but won't they recognize the ambush for what it is?"

"I hope not," answered Alex. "We are pressing our luck by pushing the Rangers and the Men of Tor into another battle so soon after last night. As good as they are, no warrior can fight indefinitely without rest. As for recognizing the ambush, there are no warriors alive who are more silent than the elves. I am confident that their presence will not be detected."

"But the abatis," frowned Theos. "It will be seen a mile away."

"Not if Balamor can hide it," Alex replied with a glance at the mage from Pog.

The illusionist merely nodded.

* * * *

Captain Plaggor was one of the few remaining cavalrymen of the 2nd Corps of the Empire of Barouk. He had narrowly survived the elven ambush that had destroyed the army's cavalry, and he was not eager to face such an event again. Perhaps because of his harrowing experience, he rode tensely, his eyes constantly scanning the sides of the road, and his ears listening intently to the sounds of the forest. He relaxed somewhat while the column crossed the great meadow called Watling Flats because he could see for a great distance in all directions, but when the trees once again closed in on the road at the eastern edge of the meadow, he grew very anxious.

About a mile from the meadow, a sudden shiver raced down the captain's spine. He nervously stared into the forest on both sides of the road, but he saw nothing. He also heard nothing, and that lack of sounds worried the captain. He immediately thought of mentioning his concern to Colonel Tamora, but he did not get along well with the colonel, and he did not want to be belittled and called a coward. He hesitated to take action. Moments later, the column halted. The captain rose in his stirrups and gazed forward. His eyes opened wide when he saw the huge abatis stretched across the road. The captain knew what was about to happen.

Captain Plaggor pulled out of the column and turned his horse around. He had just started towards the rear of the column when the shouting began in the vanguard. The captain did not hesitate. He whipped his horse hard and sunk down in the saddle, but the shouts still gained on him, and he heard bow snaps sing out right behind him. Racing along the right side of the road, the captain eased his body to the left, using the body of the horse as a shield against the attackers on the closest side of the road. The first wave of arrows passed him by and the captain watched in horror as the column before him was attacked.

The 2nd Corps was marching along the broad road in six files, and the first wave of arrows decimated the outer files. The men in the center of the road reacted in confusion and panic. Some of the men thought to charge into the woods, hoping to slay their attackers. Others knelt and brought their shields up to create a shield wall, but many of the men merely sought a path of escape. Captain Plaggor continued racing back towards the meadow, but his path was now strewn with bodies and soldiers looking for cover. Men dove out of the way of the horse when they saw it coming, but not all of the soldiers saw the horse. The captain winced as the horse collided with a running soldier and then tripped over a body. A moment later, an arrow plunged into the neck of the horse, and it screamed in agony. The horse went down, and the captain was thrown into a crowd of soldiers. Hitting the ground probably saved the captain from death during the second wave of arrows, but he gave it no thought. He rose as quickly as he could and ran along with the other soldiers who were now racing towards the meadow.

Captain Plaggor never thought he would live to make it to the meadow, but miraculously he did. The infantrymen around him began assembling a shield wall facing east, and as the Federation soldiers continued to pour into the meadow, they joined it. Eventually, no more soldiers came to add to the shield wall. The survivors waited nervously for their attackers to emerge from the woods so they could take revenge for the ambush, but nothing happened. The soldiers of the shield wall began to fidget nervously, wondering what they were supposed to do now. There was no enemy to kill in the meadow, but no one was willing to reenter the forested section of the road. So they knelt and waited.

Suddenly, there was distant movement on the road, and whispered warnings of a coming attack ran through the line of men. Everyone concentrated on the road as whatever was on it came closer at a very fast pace. Within seconds the object began to take shape and gasps of fear rippled through the line. A dragon soared over the road, and on its back sat a man dressed in shining white armor, its golden trim glistening in the sunlight. He held a long, two-handed sword in one hand, but he did not use it as the dragon soared over the shield wall and into the meadow. The soldiers turned to follow the dragon and gasped anew. Up in the sky were thousands of warriors riding on the backs of flying unicorns. The unicorns separated into two flying columns and both of them set down on the meadow to form a large semicircular barrier around the Federation shield wall, blocking any path of escape except the road they had just retreated from. The dragon turned and came close to the shield wall, close enough to see the man’s lips move. The voice when it came was clear and obviously

magnified by magic.

"I am King Arik of Alcea," declared the man on the dragon. "You have violated my borders and I demand your surrender. There is no flag of truce, nor will I accept one. You are to throw down your weapons immediately and walk into the center of the meadow. Failure to do so will result in your immediate death."

The dragon shot up into the air, and a second one came into view. It held a woman dressed similarly to the king. The men of the shield wall gawked at the flying creatures, but no one threw down his weapon. It was as if no one wanted to be the first to surrender. Even the captain hesitated, and he was more than ready to surrender. As he gazed at the beautiful woman on the dragon, he saw her face darken with anger. Her arm rose and suddenly the sky lit up with lightning. A bolt of lightning slammed into the ground near the center of the shield wall, and the reaction was immediate. The Federation soldiers raced towards the center of the meadow, throwing aside their swords, shields, and bows as they ran. Not a single soldier remained in the shield wall to challenge the King of Alcea.

* * * *

Colonel Hershey frowned as he halted in the meadow and looked at the road ahead. The Mya-Tagaret Road had been broad and well used, but at the eastern edge of the great meadow called Watling Flats, it suddenly stopped. A thick forest grew across the road, blocking further progress towards the Alcean capital.

"Get me a tracker and two scouts," the Colonel called out, "and order a brief halt to the column."

The junior officers near the colonel scrambled to carry out his orders. Colonel Hershey dismounted and waited impatiently while he watched the vanguard of the column disperse and settle down on the grass. After what seemed to be a long time, three riders approached the colonel. The colonel knew the men and their capabilities, and he wasted no time in issuing orders to them.

"The road ahead has not been used in years," the colonel began. "It is overgrown. We must have taken a wrong turn somewhere along the way. One of you scouts head north and the other south. I want to know the best way to proceed to the east from this point without marching this army through a thick forest." He then turned to the tracker and continued, "I want you to backtrack and see if you can determine where we missed the trail of the 2nd Corps. It may actually be easier to backtrack, but I do not want to waste a lot of time trying to determine that. All of you make haste with your duties. I do not want this army camped here for the entire day."

The three riders split up and left the colonel. Colonel Hershey sighed with frustration and settled down on the grass to await their

return. He had not been anxious to follow Tamora too closely, but neither had he intended to lose him completely. Despite having ten-thousand men under his command, he suddenly felt vulnerable, and he did not like the feeling.

Over an hour later, the tracker returned to the meadow. He galloped across the open area shouting about an impending attack, and soldiers rose to their feet in alarm. The unit commanders began shouting orders to form a shield wall facing west, and men scrambled to get into position. Colonel Hershey rose to his feet even before he was able to hear the words of warning. The sight of his men bracing for battle warned him of the danger, but he shook his head in confusion. He had expected any attack to come from the east, unless the snipers had gathered to attack the rear of the column, but the column was not moving. It made no sense. The colonel waited to hear the report from the tracker. He did not have to wait long.

"The enemy is behind us," the tracker said in alarm. "There are thousands of them. It is the largest assembly of cavalry that I have ever seen, and they are racing towards us."

The colonel raised an eyebrow. As most corps in the Federation army had two-thousand riders, the tracker's words indicated a serious battle was in the offing. He mounted his horse, gazing across the meadow as the 24th Corps formed up in a defensive battle formation. In the distance he could see the enemy start to ride into the meadow. The Alceans turned upon entering Watling Flats, peeling off in both directions to form a line opposing the shield wall. The colonel kicked his horse into motion and rode forward until he was just behind the shield wall. He halted alongside a captain from his own regiment.

"This looks like trouble, Colonel," the captain said softly. "Any idea where the 2nd Corps is?"

Colonel Hershey glanced right and left, checking the formation of the shield wall. "None," he replied. "We will have to stand alone."

"Who are they?" asked the captain. "Half of them do not even wear uniforms. Where did they come from?"

The colonel sighed nervously. "The uniformed ones are the Army of Cordonia. I have no idea who the others are, nor can I fathom what Cordonians are doing in Targa, but there are already enough riders opposing us to cause me considerable concern."

Sudden shouts from north of the colonel's position caught his attention. He glanced in that direction and saw men pointing towards the sky. He looked up to see a horde of flying horses coming towards the meadow. On the back of each horse was a warrior dressed in black. He watched in disbelief as the horses landed at the far northern edge of the meadow and formed a battle line. More shouts of alarm from the south caused him to turn away from the spectacle, only to

find a repeat performance in the south. The only distinction between the two groups was the lack of uniforms on the flying warriors landing at the south edge of the meadow.

“I don’t believe what I am seeing,” the colonel muttered in awe. “Flying horses?”

“Look again, Colonel,” the captain said. “There are horns upon the heads of those creatures. They are unicorns. I feel like I am dreaming.”

“Then we are dreaming together, Captain,” the colonel responded. “I estimate about one-thousand in each flying group, and ten-thousand riders to the west. Maybe more. This battle is not going to go well for us. The wings on our shield wall will never hold off a charge of a thousand men.”

All of the unicorns had landed, but a dark shadow raced across the meadow, forcing the colonel to look up again. He gasped when he saw the two dragons soaring overhead. They had come out of the east and banked lazily as the riders upon their backs stared down at the battlefield. The colonel turned to watch them as a roar of alarm ripped through the rest of the shield wall. The dragons returned to the east, but a spear shot downward before they disappeared. The spear landed right where the colonel had spent time waiting for reports, and on the end of it was a flag of truce.

“Merciful beast!” exclaimed the captain. “Wake me from this nightmare.”

The colonel said nothing, a claw of fear clutching his chest. He stared at the flag of truce with great apprehension. As the commanding officer of the 24th Corps, it was his duty to respond to it, but there was no enemy representative there. Suddenly, a swath of forest disappeared, and the extension of the Mya-Tagaret Road replaced it. Standing in the middle of the road were four people, two dressed in gleaming white and two in black. They stood ready to parley. Colonel Hershey swallowed hard and reluctantly rode towards them. When he arrived within a dozen paces, the colonel dismounted and walked a few paces further.

“I am King Arik of Alcea,” declared the man in the gleaming white and gold. “I have come to demand your surrender, Colonel Hershey.”

The colonel had figured as much. He was in a poor position to refuse if everything he saw was real, but if the sudden appearance of the road had really been the vanishing of an illusion, might not the rest be an illusion as well? He turned and gazed back across the meadow. He knew nothing of magic. He had no skills to gauge the truth or falseness of what he was seeing.

“You tricked me by concealing this road,” frowned the colonel.

“Why am I to trust what else I see?”

King Arik unexpectedly stepped forward. The colonel started as the Alcean king’s hand rose, but he did not react by grabbing for his weapon. He sighed in relief when the king’s hand rested on his shoulder.

“You can believe what you can feel,” the king said softly. “I will give you leave to examine my forces by touch if that is what it takes to end this confrontation. The road was hidden for two reasons. We did not want your army to leave this meadow before I had a chance to seek your surrender. I do not wish to kill your men, Colonel. The 24th Corps is the last of the Federation armies threatening Alcea. There is no reason for your men to die.”

“And the second reason?” asked the colonel.

King Arik removed his hand from the colonel’s shoulder and turned, waving his hand towards the road ahead. Alex, Jenneva, and Queen Tanya stepped to the side of the road so that the colonel’s view was unimpeded.

“I didn’t want your men to have to gaze upon the fate of the 2nd Corps,” the king said solemnly.

Colonel Hershey gazed along the road, which was littered with the dead of the 2nd Corps of the Empire of Barouk. He grimaced in disgust and turned his head away. The colonel turned around and gazed at his army. All of the men were watching him intently, and he shook his head in resignation. Drawing his sword, he held it high over his head and then plunged it into the ground.

Chapter 50

Respite

The Grand Ballroom of the Royal Palace in Tagaret was packed. King Arik had invited all of the provincial governors, military commanders, Knights of Alcea, and advisors from around the country. Dozens of small groups were spread around the room exchanging tales of the 13 Day War that had just concluded. While there were subdued outbreaks of laughter and gaiety throughout the room, the most common emotions were ones of great relief for the continued safety of Alcea and mourning for those lost in the battles. When King Arik and Queen Tanya entered the room, all of the conversations died, in expectation of the king's speech, but the king waved dismissively at the assembled people and began to mingle with the various groups. Alexander Tork stood quietly in a corner watching the king making his rounds. After a while, Jenneva noticed Alex's absence and sought him out. She found him in the corner and joined him.

"You are not celebrating?" she asked.

"Celebrating?" echoed Alex. "Over ten-thousand Alceans died in the last two weeks. That is not cause for celebration."

Jenneva sighed and nodded. For as long as she had known the quiet warrior, she had never known him to celebrate death, whether it was the death of a comrade or the death of an enemy, yet she felt that there was just cause for celebration, and she pushed her reasoning at her husband.

"Their sacrifices will be honored," Jenneva said softly, "but I think you lessen their sacrifices by not enjoying the very thing they died for. Alcea has been preserved. Our losses were slight compared to the Federation losses, and we managed to capture far more of the enemy than we killed. By any measure you can think of, we have far exceeded our expectations."

"Granted," Alex agreed, "but I cannot help the way I feel. Men should not have to die because some ego-driven ruler in a far off land decides to take what is not his."

"Everyone in this room agrees with you, Alex," Jenneva said. "There is more to your mood than just your abhorrence of death and killing. What is really bothering you tonight?"

Alex hesitated and then sighed deeply. "Our war with the Federation has only begun. We have indeed saved Alcea from the clutches of Emperor Jaar, or whoever is behind him, but Alcea will

never be truly safe until the Federation is destroyed completely. Tonight is just a brief respite before the war in Zara begins."

Jenneva nodded in agreement, her own mood starting to sour. "You are correct, husband, but do not drag me and the others into a pit of despair. Our celebration may be brief, but it is one that we have all earned. Join in thanksgiving for all those who have survived and leave the war in Zara for tomorrow's worries. The break will do you good."

Alex sighed again and nodded towards the king. "Our young king has grown much since this all began years ago, even just since you and I have been in Zara. He not only has a gift for ruling the people properly, but his skills at leading an army have become impressive. He is a king that I am proud to serve."

"Tanya has also grown," smiled Jenneva. "Alcea is fortunate to have the two of them."

As the two Knights of Alcea stood watching the king and queen, King Arik broke away from the group he was talking to and moved to the center of the room. The room fell quiet.

"I promise to keep my words short," the king said. "Are we all here?"

"No," General Gregor said loudly. "There are three more coming. I will hurry them along."

The general moved quickly to the door and exited the room. People began talking again, but the king remained alone in the center of the room. A few moments later, the door opened again and the general walked through and returned to where he had been standing. He left the door open and the king raised an eyebrow. Before he had a chance to say anything, Wylan and Sheri walked through the door. Zalaharic entered behind them and closed the door. The room erupted in cheers and shouts of joy. Even the face of Alexander Tork broke into a smile.

"Blessed Sword!" exclaimed King Arik as he moved towards the couple and embraced each of them in turn. "Now we have yet another reason to celebrate."

Everyone in the room wanted to talk to the two Knights of Alcea, but Wylan merely bowed to the king. Sheri smiled broadly and curtsied and then the couple moved to the side of the room so that the king might address everyone. The room fell quiet again.

"I said that I would be brief," King Arik began, "and I will be brief. The main purpose of bringing you all here tonight is to make sure that your views of this war are written down and preserved for future generations, but it also allows me a chance to tell all of you how we fared during the 13 Day War, and how much I appreciate the sacrifices made by all Alceans."

The king unfolded a piece of paper and looked at it before continuing, “In the last thirteen days, we lost over eleven-thousand Alcean patriots, a loss that will be greatly mourned throughout the kingdom. The Federation lost over sixty-five-thousand men. That is such a large number that it is hard to fathom, but there are larger numbers yet. We captured over one-hundred-fifteen-thousand Zarans in the three provinces of Lanoir, Sordoa, and Targa. We also have isolated sixty-thousand more in an alternate Universe. That is a far better result than any of us had imagined when this war began.”

The king folded up the paper and continued, “We were able to accomplish this great feat because of the people who make Alcea what it is. If we had had to depend only upon the humans among us, we would have failed miserably, but Alcea is much more than just humans. Without the elves and the dwarves, we would have lost battles in all three provinces. Without the dragons and the unicorns, we could never have even made it to some of the battles, never mind win them, and without the fairies, we would have been fighting blind, with no knowledge of enemy movements or even our own. The Federation generals never counted on such support for our war effort, and that is why they lost. We cannot expect them to act so foolishly in the future. That is why our fight must be carried to Zara. The Federation must be destroyed completely, and that part of the war will begin soon. Some of us in this room will be involved in battles over there, but all of us in this room will be involved in the struggle in one way or another.”

King Arik paused and gazed around the room at the people gathered. “I just mentioned that we have one-hundred-seventy-five-thousand Zarans under our control. Most of those men have been placed in internment camps where we are responsible for feeding them and tending to their welfare. This task is not to be taken lightly. I want these prisoners well cared for. Other than the security provisions to keep them from escaping, I want them treated as guests in our country. They will not be given rotten food or filthy water. They will eat as well as our own soldiers, or even better. If there is a shortage of food, the Zarans will be fed first.”

Murmurs ran around the room at the king’s statement, and he paused to allow the noise to die.

“These men will eventually be repatriated to their homeland after the Federation is destroyed,” the king continued. “We have already taught them that we Alceans are not prone to laying down our arms before an enemy. Now I want them to remember that the Alceans treated them well. If we fail to do this, another generation of Zarans will grow up with its eyes on our riches, and we will go to war again. I will not leave such a legacy to our children, and neither will any of

you. Go out of your way to ensure that the Zarans are well taken care of. In this way we preserve our own future generations."

King Arik moved to the queen's side, and Prince Oscar immediately moved to the center of the room before the talking began again.

"If I can just add a bit to King Arik's words," he began, "there is more we must do with the prisoners than just feed them. Men cannot remain idle for long periods of time without becoming discontented, and we don't know how long it will be before we repatriate them. I think it is essential to find meaningful work for the Zarans. I have drawn up plans that will employ tens of thousands of them in making ships for their voyage home, but we need to come up with other useful purposes that we can get them engaged in. None of the Zarans will be forced to work, but I suspect most of them would want to remain active in one fashion or another. If any of you come up with ideas, I would like to hear of them."

Prince Oscar left the center of the room and the noise level rose considerably as everyone began talking again. Jenneva turned to find Alex chuckling to himself.

"What is so funny?" she asked.

"Oscar has found a way to expand his fleet," replied Alex. "The Zarans will gladly work on the ships to take them home, and he will own those ships once he delivers the prisoners. I fully expect him to start a trading route to the Sea of Tears as soon as the Zarans are delivered home."

"And he is already soliciting other ideas," laughed Jenneva. She looked into Alex's eyes and smiled warmly, "It is good to see you smile again, Alex. You, too, have been a gift to the Alcean people, and you should never forget that."

"The people of Alcea will never forget it," said the queen as Arik and Tanya joined Alex and Jenneva in the corner. "This country owes a great debt to both of you, but then they always have. When are the two of you leaving for Zara?"

"In the morning," Alex answered. "We have governments to topple and princes to crown."

"And battles to wage," added King Arik. "May the gods watch over both of you."